

A Time To Come (Part I) by MsMrs

Series: [A Time To Come \[1\]](#)

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Brothers bonding, Canon Compliant (as of S2), Family, Family Reunions, First Kiss, Flashbacks, Fluff, Future Fic, Internalized Homophobia, Jonathan is a great older brother, Memories, Minor Angst, Multi, Period-Typical Homophobia, Underage Drinking, Underage Drug Use

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Relationships: Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler, Jonathan Byers & Will Byers, Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Joyce Byers & Will Byers, Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper, Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair, Will Byers & Mike Wheeler, Will Byers/Original Male Character(s)

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Summary:

The year 2002. The Hopper/Byers/Wheeler families reunite in Hawkins, to celebrate New Year's Eve, remembering times long gone.

Will Byers, in desperate need of a break from meaningless relationships, gets some time to reflect on his New Year's resolutions.

Or: I'm exploring my headcanon in a totally senseless way. This is

literally going nowhere, but it's fun writing.

1. December 27th, 2002

Author's Note:

Okay, so, please don't expect anything too interesting. It's literally just family reunion, and brothers bonding, because I think there's not enough Jonathan & Will fic on this site. They're awesome together, even almost twenty years after the events of Season 1 and 2.

I'm gonna add to this from time to time, showing snippets from other characters' lives after the show, but there will probably be no supernatural events, except for El's powers.

Will Byers didn't pay attention to the radio. It had been playing songs he didn't know or care about ever since he had started the car in Indianapolis, and to him, it was just background noise. Welcome background noise, though. He had always needed some noise while driving to keep his thoughts in the here and now. After all, he wanted to get to Hawkins alive. Not, that he was tired. On the plane he had slept long enough to allow for a two-hour drive.

Welcome to Hawkins, Indiana

Population: 16.920

Will wondered when the population count on the sign had last been updated. This was definitely the first time he saw it scored out. He decided to ask Hopper, should it come to an awkward silence situation between them, but quickly forgot about it when something by the side of the road caused him to slam the brakes. Lucky for him, there wasn't a single car in sight. The last thing he wanted was to get rear-ended in a rental car, especially when there was no apparent reason to stop. It was just that he couldn't just pass the path that led

away from the road, into the woods. Not this time. A part of him actually wanted to slap himself in the face.

Why now? You come back at least three times a year! In fourteen years, you haven't even acknowledged it once!

With a small, to a bystander inaudible, sigh, he turned the wheel right and pulled into the path that eventually became the driveway to his old home. It was partly overgrown by now, and though it had never been particularly even, it had become so bumpy by now, that Will could almost hear the suspension and shock absorbers pleading with him to stop. He had to drive way slower than his mom or Jonathan had ever driven here to keep it at least somewhat comfortable.

His heart skipped a beat when it came in sight. He hadn't seen it in what, sixteen years? As far as he knew, he hadn't come back once after he and his mom had moved in with Hopper and El, and the desire to be here vanished as abruptly as it had come. Now, that he had already put the car in Park and killed the engine though, he figured he should at least have a look inside.

From the outside, the house looked pretty much as he had imagined it. Familiar, but as run down as it could possibly look. The brittle wooden walls, the broken windows and the holes in the roof made the fact that it was still standing appear like a damn wonder. Of course, no one had been there to maintain it since they had moved out. Will's mother hadn't managed to find a buyer, so it still belonged to her, technically.

He slowly approached the front porch and spied through one of the windows. A cold shiver ran down his spine at the sight of the rotten wallpaper. Not because it was rotten, but because it was the

wallpaper he remembered from his early childhood. Will was suddenly convinced, he shouldn't be here. This hadn't been his home for a long time. Maybe, it had never been. Few happy memories, too many terrible ones.

It was Lonnie, calling him a queer and a fairy.

It was the Demogorgon

It was the flashbacks.

It was the Mind Flayer.

To put it simple, it was a trauma Will had long been over.

This isn't home.

There was no reason to force himself to relive it. On his way back to the car though, he stopped dead in his tracks, slowly turning his head to the left. Not far off the driveway, he noticed a wooden cross sticking in the frozen ground. He took a few steps in its direction and squatted down in front of it. With his right index finger, he ran over the name he himself had burned into the wood with a soldering iron.

CHESTER

A weak smile played around Will's lips, as he whispered

„Good boy...”

This is home.

Will immediately noticed the silver Honda Odyssey near the curb in front of the Hopper/Byers house, where his mother and Hop now lived alone. He parked the rented Impala behind it and sighed, looking at the huge front porch with the three seater swing. It wasn't like he hadn't visited just three months earlier, but coming back still filled him with nostalgia, and an unprecedented feeling of warmth and safety. Something, he had experienced in this house for the first time in years back in 1985. Will quickly reached for his large backpack in the passenger seat, picked up the duffel bag from the trunk, and then hurried towards the door.

After only ringing the doorbell once, the white, wooden door swung open, and, faster than he could even recognize the person in front of him, he already felt himself pulled into a tight hug.

„Mom!“ he laughed „It's only been...”

„...three months and fifteen days.“ she said, not letting him move an inch.

She always had this way to her, that made Will feel twelve again. Every time this thought came to his consciousness though, he liked to tell himself, he'd rather feel fourteen than twelve. 1985 and 1986 had probably been the best years of his life, and if he had a choice of any time to relive, it would be these wonderful years of healing wounds, a new home, and a family that finally felt whole. Or maybe, he'd go

back to 1987, just to climb behind the wheel of his Pinto, that was now merely a pile of scrap metal on some godforsaken junkyard in California, again, back when driving had actually been fun.

„Yeah. Forgot you're counting.“ Will mumbled, pulling himself back to reality, „How are you?“

His mom squeezed him once more before letting go, and stepping back, letting him inside.

„Six months without a single cigarette, if that's what you're asking.“ she chuckled. „I'm feeling great. Hop too, you should see him.“

„He really pulled through with it?“ Will asked, honestly a bit baffled.

He could have never imagined Hopper quitting smoking. The now gray haired police chief still looked as gruffly and rough around the edges as ever, while he was still as soft on the inside as ever, and the thought of him driving, or doing paperwork, without an unfiltered, self rolled cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, felt quite unnatural.

„I left him no choice.“ Joyce said, sounding satisfied with herself. „Besides, he's beginning to see the perks of it. He's even postponed his retirement since he feels so well. Steve's probably gonna take over five years from now. But he's already doing all the work anyways.“

Joyce winked briefly, before her expression quickly turned into a not so serious frown.

„What's that on your face?“ she asked sarcastically, causing Will to scratch his stubbly chin.

„It's called facial hair. Ask your husband, I think he knows one or two things about it.“ he replied, in an equally sarcastic tone.

„If you want to make me feel old, well, mission accomplished.“ she sighed. „But it looks good on you.“

Will knew, that was something mothers say, no matter how terrible their children might look, but he smiled nonetheless, mainly because he liked it too, but also because his mother was by no means just any mother. She had always been honest with him, especially that summer back in college, when he had decided for the Aloha shirt to be his fashion item number one.

„Come on, mom...“ Will mocked „You're only... like... seventy, or something.“

That earned him a not too gentle nudge to the shoulder and another hug.

„Sorry I couldn't make it for the holidays, by the way.“ he said.

„Yeah, well, don't make it a habit.“ she hummed, but with an understanding smile. „Mike and Ellie didn't make it either but they're gonna be here tomorrow before lunch. I'm gonna help Jon with breakfast now. You might wanna...“

„...say hello.“ Will completed it. „Absolutely.“

He took a step past his mom and yelled, in a mockingly deep voice

„Where’s my favorite niece?“

Only seconds later, something tiny with a mop of unruly, dark brown hair tackled him.

„There she is!“ he said, picking Debbie up with ease. „Jeez, you’re getting heavy.“

„I’m just growing, Uncle Will!“ she squeaked, not without a hint of childish pride „But you can’t call me your favorite! Audrey will be sad!“

Will pouted at that.

„Who ever said I can only have one favorite?“

Frowning deeply, Debbie declared

„That’s a rule.“

„Stupid rule, if you ask me.“ he muttered, already on his way to the living room. „If I had a say in it, I’d change it.“

„Me too. I’d like to have two favorite foods.“ the little girl agreed, just as the living room couch came in sight. „You look funny.“

Only a child could have been so obtuse about it. Will put on a wide grin and said

„You're just jealous because you can't grow a beard. You'd look good with a goatee.“

His niece put on a mask of mock disgust, and shook her head so violently, her fuzzy hair brushed over Will's face, stinging in his eyes a bit.

Nancy had already jumped up, almost leaping in Will's direction. He wouldn't have admitted how grateful he was when she took her little daughter from his arms, finally allowing him to put his heavy backpack and duffel bag down. He grinned at Debbie and said quietly

„Just wait until Audrey and Ben are here. I think Santa left some presents for you bunch on my doorstep.“

After that, it was Nancy's turn to embrace him, before he dropped into an armchair opposite to the couch.

„Looking good, Nance.“

„I was about to say that about you. Finally got rid of that smooth baby-face.“

Will leaned his head back, and closed his eyes. Two hours on the road were nothing compared to the eight or more hours he had sometimes driven during his late teens, but he definitely felt the exhaustion now.

„I'd really love to say hello to Jonathan...“ he contemplated „But actually, I'd love to stay right here, in this chair, way more. How was

your trip?“

„Long.“ she said bluntly „But we managed. How long are you gonna stay?“

„Uh...“ Will needed a second to remember for which day his flight back to San Francisco was scheduled „Sixth. You?“

„We figured we want to be home by fourth. I think Mike and El are gonna stay a bit longer. Speaking of Mike, your illustrations for ‚Digital Blanks‘ are just amazing. I’ve been wanting to tell you for weeks.“

Though he didn’t really enjoy praise for his work, Will smiled brightly, not without blushing. Around his friends and family, he always managed not to run away and hide until they’d all shift their attention to something that wasn’t him.

„Well... since it was Mike’s first venture into the realms of SciFi, I figured it needed something extra special. I got more on my laptop, if you want to see them later. Publisher didn’t take half of them.“

„I’d absolutely love to. And I think Mike’s got some news about the book that you’re gonna want to hear, but he’s gonna tell you himself tomorrow. I think breakfast is almost ready. Hope you’re hungry. Jon’s making French toast and Joyce is trying to help.“

„Grandma’s not good at cooking.“ Debbie said, matter-of-factly, and loud enough for the whole neighborhood to hear.

Nancy flinched slightly, and right as she was preparing to scold her daughter, Jonathan appeared in the doorway that led to the kitchen, laughing

„You go tell her, Deb. She’s messing everything up again.“

As he turned his gaze to his brother, his face dropped for a second. With a dead serious expression, Jonathan pointed at Will’s face.

„You know, that would go well with a turtleneck and a beret.“

„It’s better than that mustache you were sporting ten years ago.“ he snapped back, causing Jonathan to roll his eyes.

„The early nineties... the dark ages of fashion...“ he sighed.
„Honestly, it fits you, bud. You hungry?“

With the feeling that Jonathan wouldn’t be the last person to comment on the beard, Will lazily got up from his armchair and, after a brief but firm hug, followed his brother to the kitchen where Joyce had managed to set the table and put slices of surprisingly unburnt French toast on plates. Jonathan had probably done most of the work.

Will admired the stars. Hawkins was, by no means, the middle of the

desert, compared to San Francisco though, light pollution was almost non-existent here. It was easy to forget these things in the big city, especially for a man as busy as Will Byers. Sitting there on the swing in front of the house just a few minutes before midnight, he tried to observe the constellations, for the first time in what felt like forever. Shivering slightly, Will pulled the zipper on his jacket higher. Of course, it was cold, colder than California would ever become, but that was one of the reasons why he was out here. When he had left, he wouldn't have thought he'd ever miss the fresh, sometimes stinging winter air of Indiana. Now though, he took a few deep breaths, enjoying the feeling in his lungs to the fullest.

When the front door creaked next to him, he slowly directed his gaze away from the twinkling little lights against the black, and noticed Jonathan approaching him.

„Mind if I join you?“

„Expect me to tell you to piss off?“ Will chuckled. „Why would I? I'd like some company.“

The swing rocked back and forth a few times when Jonathan sat down, adjusting his jacket a bit.

„What are you thinking about?“ he asked.

„Nothing and everything.“ Will replied honestly, and, when Jonathan handed him a glass, added „New Years resolutions, maybe. For example this...“

He tapped his finger against the glass, while Jonathan poured him a generous amount of Whiskey.

„Drinking less. I mean, I’m not a drunkard or anything, but cutting down to one night a month probably isn’t a bad idea.“

He took a sip, relishing the familiar, burning sensation in his throat and said

„And maybe I should stop drinking alone. But, it’s still four full days until the year of the Lord 2003, so...“

„...so you gotta make it count. That’s basically how I always don’t pull through with my resolutions.“ his brother sighed, a knowing grin on his face „I’m gonna start tomorrow, I promise. Self discipline isn’t one of my strengths, but...“

„...you manage.“ Will completed the sentence „Most people do, thankfully. Uh... you heard about Joe Strummer?“

Jonathan emptied the puddle of Whiskey that remained in his glass, and nodded.

„Damn shame.“ he sighed. „Honestly though, I’d rather die of a heart attack at fifty than in a hospital bed at ninety. Fuck, I shouldn’t say that. My family’s gonna need me a few years longer. Anyways, never got a chance to see him live. I would’ve loved to. I’d love to, right now, actually. Like, really, right now.“

„God bless the twenty-first century.“ Will laughed, opening his jacket for a brief moment, to reach for the iPod in his shirt pocket. „It’s not live, obviously, but we need some music one way or the other, right? Right...“

He handed Jonathan one earphone, popped the other one into his

ear, and skipped through the playlists until he found the one, simply labeled ‚The Clash‘. ‚Safe European Home‘ started playing, and in the meantime, Jonathan had refilled both their glasses, so they both went quiet for a time, lightly humming along the songs of their youth, sipping Whiskey occasionally.

„You know...“ Jonathan chuckled, inspecting the iPod skeptically „...this is too easy. I mean, getting music from LP to cassettes, that took some time. Maybe I’m just old, but I kinda miss my Walkman.“

Will couldn’t have agreed more, still, the practical way was the way to go for him. He didn’t have time for anything else.

„Lost the vibe.“ he replied. „Just pretend it’s a Walkman, if that makes you feel better.“

„It’s alright.“ Jonathan brushed it off. „I just gotta adapt. I’ve been using a digital camera for work for a while. I’m still not really there yet. I mean, trading my darkroom for a computer screen? I don’t know if I could do that... it’s just the future, I guess.“

They went back to silence, only for half a minute. Will was already beginning to feel tipsy. Tipsy, and a bit more daring. In his completely sober state, he wouldn’t have bothered Jonathan with it, now though, the need to talk overcame him.

„The future...“ he repeated Jonathan’s last words „Can I ask you something?“

„Anything.“

Grateful, that his brother didn’t pull the old ‚technically-you-just-did‘

joke on him, Will asked

„Is there anything wrong with me?“

One of those damn thoughts that always lingered beneath the surface, waiting to be dragged into the light of day by either alcohol, or especially shattering events. Will was glad, it wasn't the latter this time. He had lived through enough troubled times for a lifetime.

„What do you mean? I mean... no. Of course not. Who said that?“ Jonathan inquired, sounding more worried than Will would have liked.

He regretted bringing the topic up.

„Nobody told me.“ he insisted „It's just that... I mean, I come back to Hawkins every few months, and I'm sure you all have noticed, I've never brought anyone along. You know like...“

„...a boyfriend?“

„Exactly.“ Will sighed „Fourteen years. Ten failed relationships. Who the fuck does that?“

There was not bitterness or anger to Will's voice, not because he was trying to suppress his emotions, but because he honestly didn't feel anything but self-doubt.

„And you think it's your fault.“ Jonathan stated. „Want me to be honest?“

„Please.“

„I think you're always too fast about this. The last guy you considered your boyfriend... I don't even remember his name... how long did you know him before you made it official?“

Will understood.

„I see where you're going. Two weeks. You think I should take it slower?“

„Hell yeah.“ his brother almost laughed. „Two weeks, I mean, that's just ridiculous. I'm not really experienced either, before Nancy I never really had a girlfriend, but two weeks, come on, that sounds unhealthy, even to a ten year old.“

„But why? Why do I always run after every... jerk?“

Will sounded desperate, pleading with his brother to tell him what he did wrong.

„Well, maybe there is something wrong with you.“ Jonathan contemplated, causing Will to look at him, dumbfounded and hurt.

„You wanted me to be honest.“ he shrugged „And I'm gonna tell you what's wrong with you. You *think* there's something wrong with you, and you're constantly trying to prove yourself wrong. But that doesn't work for damn obvious reasons. Just stop being so self-conscious.

And take a break. Not just from relationships, from work, too. You can afford it. Right?"

„I could.“ Will admitted, then, feeling better already, added dryly „That's a New Years resolution then, I guess.“

Just the act of saying it out loud had taken a weight off his shoulders.

„Did that help? At least a bit?"

„Yeah.“ he confirmed. „Weird. That was really all it took.“

„Well, just make sure to remember it.“ Jonathan reminded him, filling both their glasses once again.

Will immediately took a way too large sip, making his face turn red for a second. By now, he was more than just tipsy. He hadn't noticed it while talking to Jonathan, but he had become sluggish, almost clumsy.

„Have you ever thought about stopping with the contract work for good?" the older brother asked. „Just do your own stuff. Don't tell me it wouldn't sell. William Byers is a household name, I checked.“

„You checked?"

„Yeah. On the Internet. If your name is on the Internet, you've basically got it made. Ever heard of that encyclopedia, what's it called... uh.... Wikipedia. That's it. They got an article about you.“

Will grinned, although with the slightly uncomfortable feeling, that this whole Internet thing could really become a problem in the future. He shuddered with disgust at the prospect of having every detail about him and his life published by self-proclaimed journalists. Then again, that was nothing new, he just wasn't famous enough to appear in every tabloid.

„It's not like I don't enjoy getting credit for my work.“ he sighed „If you say it to my face, it makes me uncomfortable, but it always gets my spirits up in the end. I'd just like to keep my face out of public view, that's all. Things are taking off way too fast since I helped with the concept art for Star Wars. Oprah wanted me on the show, you know.“

When he realized what he had said, it was already too late. Jonathan choked, his eyes widening almost comically.

„You're kidding!“ he gasped, and Will couldn't do anything but shake his head.

„They invited me in September, but I said no. End of the story.“ Will bluntly said, hoping to direct the conversation away from the topic. „If you want to know more about my life, you're gonna have to ask your wife for permission to buy the next Playboy issue. Or, just ask me.“

The fact that he had agreed to the Interview was already well known around his family, and while he had expected Jonathan to get the hint and switch topics, he wasn't prepared for the sudden shift in his brother's expression. Jonathan's mask of drunkenly over-dramatized shock made way for a close to devious smile.

„Speaking of Nance... I shouldn't tell you this...“ he whispered „...but I can't keep it to myself any longer.“

Will leaned in Jonathan's direction to understand him a little better, his relief quickly changing to excitement.

„You can't tell anyone. Promise.“ he insisted.

„I promise.“ Will solemnly said, in a terribly cheesy tone, that would have fit in an 80s adventure movie.

He already had a feeling where this was going. Nothing more than an assumption, so he kept his mouth shut, in case he was wrong.

Jonathan went on

„Not even Debbie knows. Nancy wants to announce it to everyone on New Years Eve, so you better...”

That did it. Will burst out

„No way!”

Jonathan stiffened and pressed one hand over Will's mouth.

„Shh!” he hissed „The walls are thin and I think Nancy's still up!”

He then relaxed though, letting his hand drop back into his lap, with an almost infantile grin.

„You know...” Will chuckled „...you should have told Debbie in advance. Now, we're gonna have to deal with a six year old asking us about how babies are made for the rest of our stay.”

„I know, I know.“ Jonathan muttered. „We just figured she'd spill the beans. We're gonna manage, like we always do. We don't know if it's a boy or a girl yet. Wanna place bets?“

„No, thanks.“ Will declined. „I want it to be a happy surprise, no matter what.“

With a brief glance at the small puddle of whiskey left in the bottle, he added

„Um... maybe you should tell me again tomorrow. What if I don't remember in the morning?“

„I kinda hope you don't.“ his brother admitted. „If you do, you're gonna have to act like you're surprised when Nancy tells everyone, okay?“

„Got it.“

Jonathan emptied the glass once again before he mumbled

„Finish the bottle?“

„Why not?“ Will shrugged. „We can sleep in. The perks of having a mom...“

„Listen!“ Jonathan suddenly gasped, and Will immediately picked up

on the recognizable guitar and bass line that came from the small speaker in his ear.

„Can we risk it?“ he slyly asked, peeking around in the neighborhood. Every window he saw was pitch black as the night sky.

„What could they possibly do? Call our step-dad on us?“

So, they sang along to ‚Death or Glory‘ at the top of their lungs, not caring for the fact, that no one but them could actually hear the music, and, that they probably sounded way worse than they even noticed.

*„But I believe in this, and it's been tested by research
He who fucks nuns will later join the church“*

Will and Jonathan shouted the lines into the cold December air, bursting out in loud laughter.

„Remember what mom said when I played the album for the first time?“ Jonathan pressed through his teeth.

Will needed a second to pull himself together, but nodded to tell him, he remembered vividly. Then, trying to imitate Joyce's voice, he choked up

„Well, I'm happy for those nuns. Celibacy is a joke anyways.“

The brothers didn't want to call it a night when the song was over,

but they both felt, it would be better to, at least, relocate to the living room.

2. December 28th, 2002

Notes for the Chapter:

First of all, many thanks for the positive comments on Chapter 1! I don't know anything better to say than THANK YOU, so it would feel a bit redundant to reply individually. Hope, you don't mind.

Chapter 2... I kinda got a plan where I'm going with this, so I updated the summary and fiddled with the tags a bit (which I will probably do a lot in the future). I'm just trying to get some of my headcanon down, but again, nothing too supernatural. I kinda just want all of them to get a lifelong break after S2, because they just deserve it. I want everyone to be happy.

Prepare for a few chapters from Mike's POV, including some amount of Mileven. And, maybe prepare for shorter chapters, I don't know yet.

Mike Wheeler always enjoyed coming back to Hawkins. In his mid teens, he would have never thought he'd ever actually like this town, but back then, it had been basically his whole world. It had taken some time for him to realize that leaving wasn't that hard, and that the world was just so much bigger than a little nest somewhere in the woods of Indiana. Now, he enjoyed it so much, he had made monthly visits a habit. The three hour drive from Chicago was something he didn't particularly like, at least not with the kids in the car. Of course, he wouldn't have told them, but some days, Audrey's constant nagging could really get on his nerves. Today was not one of those days though.

„Are we there yet?“

It probably was the fiftieth time the five year old had asked the same question, but Mike just continued humming along to the music,

letting El deal with it. He grinned when she gave him a warm smile through the rearview mirror. She liked to sit in the middle between Audrey and Ben for longer trips, mainly to stop Audrey from teasing Ben.

„Just a few more minutes.“ she said in her motherly tone, that sounded so drastically different from anything Mike had ever heard from her before they had become parents.

Even now, at the beginning of his thirties, Mike hadn't grown fond of the thought, that he was an adult. He knew, El wasn't either. As a kid, it had seemed like crossing the barrier from child to adult would be a sudden change, and for much of his early twenties, Mike had just felt like he had missed out on it, and continued to be a teenager. He blinked a few times to keep his focus on the road, not on these pointless thoughts. He was grown up enough to make a living, do his taxes, and make time for his family and friends, and even if he wasn't, he'd still have a literal super hero for a wife, and a super hero in the making for a daughter. A daughter, who luckily shared his taste in music, at least for now.

„Louder, daddy!“ Audrey squeaked, when ‚Man on the Moon‘ started playing, and Mike happily complied.

Mike spotted a Honda Odyssey and a rented Impala in front of the house, and pulled into the driveway. If Hop didn't like him blocking the garage, he'd just wave a cigarette in front of the Chief's nose.

„Don't you dare, Michael.“ El scolded while he put the car in Park. „He's not gonna start smoking again because of you.“

„I wasn't going to do it.“ he groaned. „I should really keep my mind shut sometimes. You're never gonna spy on me that way, right Audrey?“

„That's rude!“ his daughter declared, throwing her mother a disapproving glance.

„You were blasting that full volume, just so you know.“ El huffed in her defense.

Already swinging the door open, Mike turned to Ben and chuckled

„Always watch what you're thinking around our girls. You might be Ben Kenobi but the force is stronger in those two. Sorry, you can't learn that early enough.“

The two year old wiggled in his seat a bit. Thankfully, he had slept for most of the ride.

„Grandma!“ he suddenly yelped, clumsily trying to get out of the car.

Joyce had already picked up Audrey, so El had all the time she needed to unbuckle Ben's seatbelt and pick him up. In the meantime, Mike grabbed all the bags they had brought. He buckled a bit under their weight. It was more than usual, of course, because they'd stay for a week, and being away from home for a whole week with a two year old child means you have to prepare for everything. His view

half obstructed, he carried the bags past Joyce, giving her a warm smile, and into the house, where he was welcomed by the warmth of a fireplace, and Hopper.

„About time.“ his father-in-law grunted, with the coldest stare imaginable.

„Yeah, about time for you to go to work.“ Mike snapped, dropping the bags to the floor.

„Took the rest of the year off. I can do that, I’m the Chief.“

Hop pulled him into a rough, one-armed hug, and put on the friendly, almost soft face only family members ever got to see, right in time for El to wrap her arms around him, and to pick up his grandchildren. He pretended to be struggling with Audrey’s weight.

„Jeez, you’re getting too heavy to pick up, I swear.“

For a brief moment, his face dropped and he seriously struggled a bit to keep her in his arms. Mike quickly picked up on it.

„Hey!“ he sharply said „We talked about that! No floating!“

„Grandpa said I’m too heavy.“ Audrey said, pouting innocently.

„Why don’t you go say hello to your uncles?“ Hopper suggested. „They’re in the living room, and I think you have to cheer them up a bit.“

He set Audrey down, and she quickly darted off.

„Nance and Debby?“ Mike asked, once she was out of sight.

„Shopping for lunch with your mom.“ Hopper replied, now with a concerned expression. „She’s getting really strong.“

„Yeah.“ El sighed. „I didn’t expect her to be quicker than me with these things. Floating at five... But I honestly don’t know what to do about it.“

„Imagine what it’s gonna be like ten years from now.“ Mike contemplated, while El handed Ben over to Hop. „I mean, I’d be happy if I could keep her on a leash at all times.“

„You’re gonna get through it.“ he reassured them. „I’ve survived my psychic teenage daughter, you’re gonna survive yours.“

„Yeah.“

Mike really wasn’t so sure about that. The circumstances were entirely different with Audrey. She was growing up in a family, almost oblivious to her mother’s past. She’d probably take many things for granted later in her life, and that simple fact could make her outbursts more dangerous. He and El had even played with the thought of homeschooling her, at least until Middle School, to teach her to control these things better. The last thing they needed was their daughter accidentally using her powers in class. Eventually, they had decided against it though, unwilling to lock her away for years, or to keep her from having friends, and so far, she was

handling Preschool pretty well, and that was reason enough for Mike to hope she'd never lose control in a critical situation.

Without even thinking about it, he had made his way to the living room, leaving Hop with El and Ben. He quickly understood why Hopper had told Audrey to cheer up Will and Jonathan. Both brothers looked a bit hungover, though they did their best not to let Audrey know.

„Look, daddy! Uncle Will's got a beard!“

Mike had already noticed, and thought it looked pretty good.

„Looks super grown up.“ he commented.

Will smiled weakly, his eye bags twitching slightly.

„Long night?“ Mike asked, letting himself sink into an armchair.

„You have no idea.“ Jonathan groaned in response. „I'm not twenty anymore.“

„You could have at least waited until New Year's Eve. You're gonna be back on your feet by then, right?“

As if he had to prove something, Will let Audrey stand up from his lap, and jumped to his feet. Mike had to admit, he didn't look all that sick anymore.

„Nothing I haven't been through a hundred times.“ he said, before dropping back onto the couch. „How are things in Chicago?“

„It's... cold.“ Mike couldn't think of anything better to say. „Otherwise, it's same old Chicago. How was Christmas?“

„Didn't really celebrate.“ Will sighed, causing Mike a small sting in his stomach.

He knew about Will's recent breakup. Before he could say anything though, Jonathan lazily grunted, with half-closed eyes

„We've already been over that.“

„Yeah.“ Will agreed. „It's fine. Nancy mentioned you got some news I might wanna hear.“

„She did?“

Mike had no clue what Will was talking about.

„About the book... your book... ,Digital Blanks'.“

„Oh... yeah. Yeah, I almost forgot!“ Mike quickly said, finally remembering.

He couldn't suppress the excited grin that spread on his face. There was a bit of worry, and even guilt involved too. He honestly didn't know how to feel about this yet. There was no use talking around it, so he simply stated

„Schools all over the country are buying truckloads of it.“

„Uh... why?“

Will stared at him, as if the message didn't really get through to him, while Jonathan had seemingly dozed off. Meanwhile, Audrey was shifting through a magazine on the coffee table without paying attention to them. Still, Mike didn't want her to hear the language he'd just have to use to explain things.

„Hey, big girl, could you find mommy and see if you can help her with anything? Like, unpacking?“ he asked.

„Okay, daddy.“

With Audrey probably nearby, he still tried to keep the volume down.

„I have no fucking clue why.“ he chuckled. „I mean, they've told me, but I don't understand. It's... complete bullshit, if you ask me.“

„Come on man, you're being cruel.“ Will pressed „Tell me.“

„Okay, so, listen to this. They apparently really like to analyze and discuss my comments on current and historical events. That's pretty much what the publisher told me. I'm getting letters, Will. Like, fan mail, but from teachers and college professors. They're all like ‚Your book will make people realize the War on Terror isn't gonna work out better than the Vietnam War‘.“

„No way!“ Will gasped, obviously as stunned by the news as Mike.

„I’m not kidding you. They’re talking about it as if it’s the new ,Catcher in the Rye‘. I never intended for any of this, I swear. It’s a fucking novel. War on Terror my ass, I wrote the first draft, like, ten years ago. I just told a god damn story, but they’re all creaming their pants about the hidden meaning behind everything. It’s close to climbing the New York Times Best Seller list!“

The hint of pride that Mike felt about this was nothing compared to his amusement, that had apparently also befallen Will. Wiping the tears from his eyes, he laughed

„Don’t tell anyone! Those intellectuals can be idiots, but as long as they buy the book, I wouldn’t complain. Hell, I don’t complain. I make money out of it. It’s a pretty good story though.“

„It’s got damn good illustrations, too.“ Mike said honestly, happy to see Will blush at his compliment. „I’m kinda worried though. You know, I wanted to do a sequel, but now there are all these expectations. If it was just fans, waiting for a good story, I’d be fine, but... I think I’m just gonna wait with that until sales drop. I’d need at least a year to complete it anyways.“

„I get it. No pressure. You can always go back to fantasy and horror.“ Will sighed. „And, please, for your next book, don’t send me drafts all the time. For once, I just wanna read one of your stories from beginning to end, like a normal person.“

„Okay.“ Mike agreed. „But just so you know, I always appreciate your feedback. Some of the stuff I’ve put out wouldn’t have been half as good without you keeping an eye on it.“

Mike grinned when Will blushed again. It was just too easy to get his best friend embarrassed of himself. He'd really have to try to get Will to handle well deserved praise a bit better. He didn't have the time to think of something he could say, before he heard the front door creak again.

„That's gotta be Nance and my mom.“

Only an hour after lunch, Mike finally got some peace and quiet. Well fed children are tired children, so Audrey and Debby lazily showed each other their Christmas presents in relative silence, while the adults relaxed around the dining room table with mugs of warm punch. Only Ben was with them, babbling mostly nonsense, which filled Mike with an unprecedented amount of pride. After a bit of shuffling under the table, Will produced a large bag and began rummaging through it.

„Almost forgot...“ he said „...Santa left some presents for you kids on my doorstep.“

The silence broke immediately, obviously much to Hopper's dismay. He rolled his eyes once but kept quiet. It didn't take two seconds for Audrey and Debbie to stand in front of him, jumping from one foot to the other.

„Let's see... this one says Deborah. Read the card first.“

Debbie frowned slightly, probably trying to decipher Will's handwriting.

„It says it's about science!“ she finally yelped excitedly.

Mike had anticipated something like that. He knew how much of a science geek his niece was, not unlike himself and his friends in their childhood, and since Nancy and Jonathan seemingly had already taken care of the girly presents, it was Will's job to further fuel her thirst for knowledge.

„A microscope!“ Debbie all but screamed.

She already carefully began unpacking it, when Audrey's shriek rang sharply in Mike's ears, giving Will virtually no time to talk to Debbie about her present. Because it depended on another present Audrey had gotten for Christmas, Mike knew what hers was. A small collection of GameBoy Advance games. El had been a bit reluctant to let her five year old play video games, but Mike had insisted on it, completely fed up with his daughter blocking his Super Nintendo for hours on end. Having never felt too old for Super Mario, he loved how she had inherited his geeky traits though.

„They're for my GameBoy!“ she squealed, at least as happy as she had been when she had opened her gifts at home.

„So you got a GameBoy for Christmas?“ Will asked, fake surprise so obvious it probably didn't even fool Debbie.

Mike watched with amusement as his best friend reached for his pocket, producing his own electronic toy.

„Santa got me one too.“ he said. „I guess I was really good this year. Let’s see if you know any secret exits in Super Mario World I haven’t discovered yet. Ben’s gotta open his present first, though.“

Upon hearing his name, the two year old waddled over to Will, from where he had been watching Debbie unpack her microscope. Mike couldn’t possibly know how much his son actually understood of all this, he wasn’t really a talker yet, but from the words he babbled, it was pretty clear how excited he was. Ben clumsily ripped the light blue wrapping paper off the box. It was a set of large, child safe toy cars, and once El had opened the box, there was no holding back for Benjamin. As for most children, collisions were his favorite. Nothing to worry about, but Mike’s heart skipped a beat when the kid flipped a white van over another car.

„You know, Joyce, we could just stay with my mom if this is too much for you.“

Mike had just returned to the living room, after putting Ben to sleep for the fourth time that night. The usual struggle with bedtime.

„We’re fine.“ Hopper preempted his wife. „Some noise around the house is nice for once.“

„Easy for you to say. You only got that once a month.“ El giggled. „I can’t remember sleeping through a single night for two years.“

„Yep, he’s difficult.“ Mike sighed, dropping onto the couch next to her.

He peered around the warm, dimly lit room lazily, hoping he’d not have to get up again too soon. Hopper and Joyce on the couch opposite to him looked entirely content with the situation, Will, in an armchair, had his eyes half-closed. Only Nancy and Jonathan didn’t make a relaxed impression. She was constantly biting her lip, shifting from one side to the other, while Jonathan occasionally gave her comforting smiles, looking nervous himself in between them for most of the time though.

„Something wrong, Nancy?“

El had apparently picked up on it too, and said out loud what Mike had been thinking. He wouldn’t have brought it up because Jonathan seemed to be in on it, so it was most likely private, but his wife had always had this direct way of talking about problems.

„Uh... what?“ Nancy said absent-mindedly, as if she just had snapped out of thoughts. „I mean... no, I’m fine. Really. I’m good.“

Mike pressed El’s hand a little to let her know she should let it rest for the night. Nancy would talk to them if it was too serious, and to be honest, Mike wanted to relax for a bit. As an adult, there was more stress involved in the holidays than he would have ever thought possible. Now, that he let his wander across the photographs on the walls though, his mind was all but flooded with memories.

Him and El back home from the hospital, with the little bundle that Audrey had been just a few years ago.

A similar photo of Jonathan, Nancy and Debbie.

Graduation photos.

And the one photo, that always caught his attention. Though he couldn’t exactly pinpoint why, this one photo, that every party

member and every one of their parents, except for Ted Wheeler, owned a copy of, brought up the most vivid memories he had of the eighties.

It showed a parking lot on a sunny day, with six people in the frame, sitting on the hoods or standing in front of a well maintained, green Ford Pinto and a rusty Ford Torino Station Wagon that must have been beige once, smiling into the camera as if there wasn't a worry in the world. Because there hadn't been a worry in the world back then. Will, in the far left corner of the photo, and Dustin, in the far right corner, were both holding on to the corners of a slim banner, that read *,San Francisco - 1987'*. Mike remembered how his and El's fingers were intertwined behind the canvas, and how Lucas had his arm around Max's waist. He remembered how Will had already decided to move to San Francisco by the time that photo was taken, and he remembered how Dustin had made faces on the first two attempts. He owned copies of those photos too, as well as of the ones they had taken in front of the Golden Gate Bridge.

Notes for the Chapter:

By the way, I haven't forgotten about Holly.

3. July 23rd - July 25th, 1987

Notes for the Chapter:

A few days ago I was all like 'prepare for shorter chapters'.

Well, fuck me, this turned out to be longer than I expected. This is obviously Mileven, but in the end, it's all gonna be about Will. I'm gonna try not to stray off as much in the future. :P

And, if you don't get it, this is a flashback.

„Get over there, Dustin! No... Jesus! How dense are you? To the left! Good. Lucas and Max, a bit to the right. Ugh... to the right from my... yeah right, that's your left.“

Will let out a frustrated growl, much to Mike's amusement. Staging a perfect photo in front of the Golden Gate Bridge wasn't easy, apparently.

„I really don't like setting the camera up here for someone to snatch it but I wanna be in the photo too.“ Will rambled.

He set the timer, and quickly hurried to join the party. Behind them, the water of the Pacific shimmered bluer than the sky, the iconic red bridge giving it somewhat of a contrast. With Mike's beautiful girlfriend in front of it, the scene was as picture perfect as it could get.

He absolutely loved how the air smelled near the sea. Of course, it was still a big city, so the unmistakable scent of dirty exhaust pipes lingered everywhere, but a fresh ocean breeze always managed to swipe that away for a second. Though, he considered it an absolute cliché, sightseeing did have its advantages. It was just something he felt he had to experience, even if it was old people stuff.

Looking back, leaving the cars at the motel, and going to the city by

bus had been the best decision they could have made. This place was crowded as hell, and some of the roads were so steep, Mike wouldn't have trusted his run down Torino Station Wagon or himself with them. Besides, everyone kind of hoped for a chance to get a drink, even if it was unlikely, and driving drunk was absolutely off limits, not just because the law said so. The memories of Mike's last hangover were long gone, as it always is with alcohol, and he knew he wasn't the only one to actively look for an opportunity to get drunk. Not that he wanted to make this whole trip about that, it was just that he was sixteen, and sixteen year olds want to get shit-faced from time to time.

„You know, I really hope I haven't fucked up all our photos so far.“ Will sighed, picking up the camera „Jonathan kinda taught me how to do it, but if they all come out as a blurry mess...”

„Don't worry, we'll know who's responsible.“ Lucas teased „And it's gonna earn him a kick in the balls. Anyways, wanna find a place to eat something? I'm starving.“

„I've seen this really kinda old school diner a few blocks down that street“ Max interjected „Not like one of those roadside shitholes. It looked clean, like you'd get your food to the table and everything.“

„Sounds awesome.“ Dustin cheered.

Since no one had a better idea, they began their search for the Diner. It took them a while, and when they found it, Mike knew immediately what Max had been talking about. ‚*Big Dan's 24h Restaurant*‘ looked like it could have been used as a set for all the iconic fifties movies. From the pink and green neon sign over the entrance to the sparkling clean checkered floor and the shiny turquoise padded seats in the booths, everything was absolutely

perfect. Mike had expected more Hippie culture than anything, because, according to one of his favorite authors, San Francisco had once been a very special place to be a part of, but then again, it wasn't the sixties anymore. Since 'Back to the Future' had hit the theaters, the fifties were suddenly somewhat cool again. He was delighted to see no one inside except staff was dressed like it was the fifties though. He preferred his pants fitting and not pulled up to his chest. El marveled at the colorful interior, but Lucas seemed a bit uncomfortable, maybe he was just making a joke, because he muttered

„Not a good place and time for people like me...”

Max playfully shoved him towards a booth near the wide glass front.

„We're not gonna sit in the back“ she teased „and this isn't Alabama or something.“

„I'm just saying... thirty years ago this whole country was Alabama.“ he chuckled.

As if to make fun of Lucas, Dustin began quietly humming 'Sweet Home Alabama' to himself.

They didn't have to wait long for a waiter to approach them. The poor guy was probably in his early twenties, and Mike noticed he looked like he absolutely hated his job. That smile was just too fake.

„Welcome, Ladies and Gentlemen, what can I get you today? Something to drink first while you look at the menus?“ he hissed through his teeth, and Mike felt a slightly uncomfortable, seeing him suffer like this.

„Um... you don't have to do this“ he quietly said.

The place wasn't exactly full, but he didn't want anyone else to hear, in case the waiter might be forced to keep it up. To Mike's relief, the young man's face dropped, and he relaxed his whole body.

„Thank God!“ he said under his breath „Those tourists are killing me. You know, you can only listen to ‚Peggy Sue‘ from that crappy old jukebox so often, before it starts eating you.“

Max couldn't hold back her laughter, and the waiter smirked.

„By the way, my name's Aaron.“ he pointed at his name tag „and it's my questionable pleasure to be your waiter today. Have a look at the menus and I'll be back whenever you need me, okay?“

He handed them a couple of menus wrapped in dark red imitation leather. Orders were placed quickly, and as Aaron served them their meals only a few minutes later, he began eying the party in a slightly audacious way.

„Say...“ he muttered „you guys aren't from here.“

That was more a statement than a question.

„What gave us away?“ Lucas laughed.

„Well, for once, you're here. People who live here don't go to this sort of retro diner. Also, you're way too pale.“ he remarked.

Mike looked at his arms and hands. He honestly didn't know why the desert sun of Arizona and New Mexico hadn't taken care of that, but he agreed. They all were pretty pale, except for Lucas of course, but

pointing that out would have been highly inappropriate. Aaron was chewing on his lower lip as if he was contemplating something.

„Pretty hard having fun here when you're not twenty-one, right?“ he mumbled „How long are you staying?“

„About a week...“ Dustin said, nodding.

„Uh... so you're definitely not twenty-one, and I guess none of you guys is eighteen, right?“ Aaron went on, and everyone nodded.

Mike was a bit anxious to hear what was next.

„If you want I could write you down some addresses. Like, places that don't check IDs.“ Aaron offered „They're pretty easy to find, but most of them aren't exactly what you'd call... safe, you know. I know a few where you won't get mugged, or raped.“

Mike became almost ecstatic at the prospect of really getting to go places. Not a glimpse of worry crossed his sixteen year old mind.

„We figured we'd have to go look for places like that sooner or later.“ he said, and Aaron laughed.

„Everyone does. Sooner or later. Just so you know, getting you in doesn't mean getting you drinks. If you wanna get drunk, tough luck.“

They had expected something like that. Still, being able to at least visit a club would be nice. Aaron pulled out the little notebook he

used to write down orders, and began scribbling.

„You got maps and bus schedules, all that stuff, right?“ he asked, handing Mike a small piece of paper „Ah, of course you do...”

Mike handed the little note around, and the party grinned gratefully at Aaron.

„Tell you what“ he proposed „You all look like you're on a bit of a budget here so, wanna crash a party tomorrow? Totally free of charge.“

„You barely know us and you wanna take us to a party?“ Mike asked, finally getting slightly suspicious. Aaron tried to suppress a wave of laughter, but failed miserably.

„Shit, I already know you guys better than I know the host. That's why it's called *crashing* a party. All I know is, *that* it's gonna happen and *where* it's gonna happen. My brother is invited, he told me. Like I give a shit what it's about as long as there's booze for free.“

„So you're a cheap bastard.“ Lucas sneered „Good, me too. Let's do it, guys!“

Mike sighed, but agreed. He didn't want to ruin the fun for everyone else with his paranoia. What could go wrong? They were six people, all of which had at least some experience in fighting. One of them was a telekinetic super hero, one was totally bad ass in her own right. Plus, the look of anticipation and excitement on El's face made it absolutely impossible for Mike to decline. It looked like she really wanted to live the life on this trip and he didn't have anything against it. Little did he know, that party would change one of their

lives forever, and not for the worse.

„Alright“ Aaron cheered „Meet me tomorrow, eight in the evening, in front of this place. It's just a twenty minute walk on foot. And please, don't forget this...“ he pointed at the note he had given them „...when you tip me.“

With that, he left them alone with their massive burgers.

„I guess that's gonna be fun.“ Mike said in Will's direction but his friend didn't seem to notice him.

He was staring out the window, as if something there on the street had caught his attention. Mike followed his gaze, and two young men came in view. The remarkable thing was, they were walking down the street, hand in hand. Mike could see Will's glistening eyes, and immediately understood.

„It's a good place, huh?“ he whispered into Will's ear, careful not to let the others hear him. None of them knew about Will's little secret, they were too busy with their burgers though.

„They kissed, Mike...“ Will whispered back. „Like, out in the open. No one seemed to mind.“

Mike patted his friend's shoulder, unsure of what to say, and then got to work on his lunch.

The party were eager to check out one of the places Aaron had recommended. He had commented on some of them, and they decided, since they would probably get some real action the next night, they'd go to a place he had described as ,chill'. The outside was pretty much what Mike had expected of a club that doesn't care too much about conforming to the law. Probably a former warehouse from a time when industrial work still happened downtown instead of in the outskirts. He couldn't deny it had a certain charm to it. There was an initial scare when Mike noticed the massive bouncer but that guy looked bored as hell and just let them all pass without thinking twice. Now that they were inside, Mike was glad to have someone like that in front of the door. He'd probably keep the worst kind of people outside. The club was full of young people, most probably older than 18, but regardless, Mike felt comfortable. Calling it ,chill' had been exactly right. It was kinda dark, kinda moody, and the place smelled like cigarettes. Slow dance music was playing, and the dance floor was mostly empty. The party sat down in a booth around a round table. The wood had all sorts of dents, stains and sharp edges, the seats were torn up in places with metal springs sticking out of them.

For some reason, Mike loved this place, and the way El snuggled into his side told him, she did too. He really felt like he could relax here. They got themselves some coke and ginger ale, and Mike glared over at Will from time to time. Will stared back at him with somewhat sad eyes, which Mike just couldn't stand. Seeing his best friend so desperate, but full of hope at the same time caused his heart to ache.

„Hey guys... would you excuse me and Will for a sec?“ he asked, grabbing Will by the wrist and leading him to a remote corner of the club.

„Tell them.“ he soothingly whispered trying a supportive smile „Tell

them now, Will.“

Will looked pained and insecure.

„What if they... I don't know...” he began stuttering.

„El already knows“ Mike said bluntly, and Will's eyes grew wide.

„You told her?“ he hissed reproachfully.

„No.“ Mike answered, doing his best to sound relaxed „After our little... misunderstanding in March... she just asked me if it was because you're gay. Lying to her would have been no use. She's totally cool with it. Besides, did you really think you could hide that? She's the only one in your house you haven't told yet.“

Will nodded with the smallest sigh of relief.

„I guess the others are suspecting something too then...” he muttered more to himself, while looking at his feet „You're right. Tonight is the night.“

„Okay, let's get back there and...” Mike started, but he was cut short by an all too familiar melody.

A wide grin spread on his face, and he darted back to their table, before pulling El to her feet.

„Dance with me.“ he said, directing her over to the dance floor,

where she immediately wrapped her hands around his neck.

*„Every breath you take
Every move you make
Every bond you break
Every step you take
I'll be watching you‘*

„This is kinda... our song, right?“ she giggled, before she leaned in for a soft, short kiss, much like the one they had shared at the Snow Ball almost three years ago.

Mike felt his heart swell. Suddenly, he was back in their old middle school gym, holding that awkward girl with too much lip gloss, who rarely spoke, close to himself. Just once he tried to make out the rest of the party in the dark of the club, and it looked a bit like Dustin was patting Will's back. So, he hadn't even waited for Mike and El to be there. Good.

„I think Will just told the others he's... you know.“ Mike whispered.

El hummed and rested her head against his chest.

„Good for him. The way he stared at that gay couple earlier today really gave it away.“

„You noticed?“ Mike gasped.

„Just shut up, and enjoy the music.“

And so he did. In some ways, this was just as intimate as anything they could do in the back of his car, or in a motel room. They stayed there long, until a slightly faster song finally broke up their sleepy intimacy.

„I really thought you guys had forgotten about us by now.“ Dustin sneered with mock consternation when they arrived back at their table „Had fun, lovebirds?“

„Where are Lucas and Max?“ Mike asked.

„Wanna guess?“ Dustin pointed over at the dance floor.

„Wow, I didn't even notice them.“ Mike muttered back, while El responded with a small giggling sound.

„I did.“ she remarked.

„Anyways, Lucas, Max and I agreed...“ Dustin snickered „...that we're gonna get Will here a boyfriend. One way or another.“

Mike grinned, and, peering over at Will noticed, his best friend didn't look all that happy.

„So you told them.“ he noted.

„Yeah“ Will groaned „and now they're all gonna play matchmaker. I don't know if I want that.“

„Relax.“ Dustin tried to calm him „We just want you to get a chance to make out with someone. That much should be possible. It's San Francisco, after all. Not at this place though. Some of these guys over there look seriously infested.“

He pointed over at the bar where a bunch of not too clean looking guys were playing Darts.

„There you guys are!“ Aaron greeted them in front of the diner.

He had already swapped his work uniform for a flannel shirt, jeans and sneakers.

„Ready to crash a party?“

„Sure, as long as we're welcome“ Dustin laughed.

„Don't worry about that, there's gonna be so many people, I doubt anyone actually keeps track of who belongs there. If they try to kick us out, snatch a few bottles of booze, alright?“

„Got it.“ Max grinned.

She was obviously no stranger to that idea.

„Alright, let's get going.“

The group followed Aaron through the busy streets. Even at eight, when Hawkins was already virtually empty, this place was still swarming with people and it probably would until way after midnight. Mike didn't feel as wary about this as he had the day before. He had decided to be a bit more open and spontaneous about everything, because, in the end, that was what their trip was really about. Walking through these streets together with his best friends, and the love of his life, gave him an amazing feeling of freedom, accompanied by the realization that the world was huge. Bigger than Hawkins, bigger than Indiana, and there was just so much to see. He loved his hometown but he sure as hell didn't plan to spend his whole life there.

„You get used to it after a while“ Aaron shouted back when he saw them all panting heavily.

Climbing up this steep street certainly wasn't a small task, but he looked just fine. Mike was still glad he hadn't brought his car into this mess though.

„Here it is.“

Their destination was one of those typical San Francisco town houses, that people had built all over the steepest of hills. Seeing the row of houses standing upright in front of the diagonal street was completely other-worldly, and Mike figured they'd either have to cut back on alcohol or stay the night, because he surely didn't want to stumble over his own feet and roll down that hill. Inside, the party was already warming up. ‚*Blue Monday*‘ was blaring out of giant speakers, and colorful lights illuminated the wooden ceiling.

For a moment, Mike tried to imagine the house without all the

snacks, bottles and party gear. It looked really cozy. The floor and ceiling were made out of dark wood, so was the paneling on the walls. He could hear some commotion from upstairs, and a somewhat worried looking girl with long black hair came hurrying down the stairs.

„New arrivals...” she mumbled, absent-mindedly „Alright, listen. Go wherever you want, third floor is off limits though. Everything up there is locked so that shouldn't be a problem, right? Okay...”

She quickly scurried away, probably headed for the kitchen.

„Well I guess we've met our host.” Aaron chuckled „Told you, no one cares who you are around here. Let's check the place out.”

It wasn't long until he met some people he knew. While he introduced them to Lucas, Max, Dustin and Will Mike decided to go upstairs with El. He located a second living room, a dining room and the bathroom. From what he had seen so far, there were already around twenty people in the house, but if Aaron had been telling the truth, there would be a lot more in no time. It was only half past eight, so they'd probably have to wait until ten for the party to really get going.

Later that evening, the house was basically swarming with people. Mike and El kept close to each other, not really in fear of getting lost, but out of pure habit, and because they both loved to be close to each other. They usually did that at parties in Hawkins too, though these

parties never were as wild as this one.

The music was deafening, the shouts and laughter did their part in that too, and most people were already a little wobbly on their legs.

Mike hadn't seen Aaron in an hour, but he had a vague idea of where the rest of his group was hanging around. Max and Lucas had obviously shed all modesty. They were passionately making out on a couch next to two other couples, all while being cheered on by a crowd of drunk, or stoned bystanders. Mike had been offered all kinds of drugs that evening, but he always had declined as politely as he could. He had a feeling though, he'd at least smoke something funny before the end of the night. The alcohol was already pulling on his ability to resist the temptation. He had never done any illegal drugs before, and he wasn't even an experienced drinker.

Grabbing themselves some beer neither of them actually liked, he and El set off to find Dustin and Will. Mike's best friend had went to the upper floor twenty minutes before, that much he knew. They came across Dustin upstairs where things were a little quieter, talking to the black haired girl from earlier that evening.

„There they are!“ he yelled, suddenly pulling Mike and El towards himself.

„So, you guys are party crashers?“ the girl said with an understanding grin. „I guess that's what I get for inviting so many people. Mike and... El, right? El... where does that come from?“

El shrugged.

„Just a nickname.“

„Yvonne.“ the girl introduced herself, shaking their hands „This is my

parents' house."

"And I guess they don't know what's going on here, right?" Mike grinned.

"No..." she sighed "They're in Washington, visiting some dying relative or whatever. Got my own place a few blocks south but as long as they're out I stay here to watch my brother."

"Uh, Dustin, have you seen Will?" Mike asked.

"Yep. I mean, not really, but Yvonne has." Dustin replied with a somewhat satisfied smile "He's having a little talk upstairs with... uh..."

"...Milo" Yvonne helped Dustin out. "My little brother. About your age, you know."

"Oh..." Mike whispered before it clicked in his head "*Oh!* So he's... um..."

"Yeah, Milo is gay, if that's what you're trying to say. Jeez, you people from the Mid-West are really uncomfortable with this." she sneered.

"We're not." El remarked. "It's just that we've only known about Will being gay for a few days."

Yvonne shrugged.

„Didn't want to offend you guys. I guess we're just lucky to have ex Hippies for parents. It's not exactly easy for people like my brother here either, just not as bad as it is around your parts of the country, I guess. Anyways, I like having people from other places around here for once. Your friend here isn't half as phony as some of my own so called friends.“

„We got enough phony people at home too“ Mike said, not really sure where he wanted to take this conversation.

Dustin nodded eagerly.

„By the way, how did you guys even end up here? It's not like I advertised in newspapers, or billboards, or something.“ Yvonne asked with a curious undertone.

„Uh... we met this guy called Aaron at a diner downtown. He said his brother was invited.“ Dustin said.

„Aaron... Aaron...“ she slowly said, rolling her eyes as though she was thinking hard. „Oh yeah, Aaron Whatshisname! Honestly, I don't know his last name, but I think he's a nice guy. His brother is a little bitch though. So damn pretentious. Can't remember ever talking to him more than a few words.“

„Then why'd you invite him?“ El interjected.

„Easy.“ she smirked „He always brings a shit ton of weed. Don't know how, don't care. The important thing is, I don't have to pay for it and it keeps the stoners from getting drunk. Stoned is better than drunk, if you ask me. At least they don't fuck up the house if they're sitting on their asses, giggling like retards, right? It's just not for everyone. Want something?“

She offered them a joint she had kept in a black cigarette case, as if that was something she did all the time.

„Uh...“ Mike began, feeling just a bit on edge, because he had been asked so many times this evening.

„Oh come on.“ Dustin groaned, and nudged Mike's upper arm „Live a little. Wanna take this to the stoner corner?“

He pointed at a corner of the room where a bunch of colorful beanbags had been placed on the floor under the window. El smiled nervously, but nodded, so Mike didn't have a choice anymore. He emptied his beer, and followed Yvonne to the ‚stoner corner‘. Someone had even made a crude cardboard sign, and taped it to the window with duct tape.

After lighting a cigarette for herself, she lent them her Zippo, but then excused herself. It was obvious that she was just a little bit worried about all the prized possessions in her house. Dustin quickly took the first drag, and immediately began coughing worse than Mike's car.

„Holy shit“ he spat out between coughs, handing the joint over to Mike.

„My parents told me not to give in to peer pressure.“ he muttered „Fuck me, here goes nothing, right?“

With that, he took a drag. He managed to keep it in way better than Dustin, but the dizziness that overcame him almost instantly was absolutely unreal. Mike was convinced he had inhaled sandpaper. His lungs ached with the sensation of hot, rough smoke filling them.

Quicker than he had expected, he felt hot from the center of his body to every finger and toe. It wasn't an unpleasant feeling, though. Giggling excitedly, El snatched the joint from Mike's hand, and all but sucked on it. Her cough was worse than Dustin's, but she seemed to get used to it relatively quickly. Soon, a dorky grin had spread on all their faces, and Mike couldn't stop himself from giggling... like a retard, as Yvonne had put it so bluntly. But everything was just so awesome. This city. This house. El cozily snuggled against him in their beanbag. The fact that Will might have found someone to talk to, or even more. The muffled music from downstairs, that made colors in the room pulsate to the beat. Mike couldn't remember ever being more satisfied with himself and the world.

„Isn't this just fucking amazing?“ he sighed.

„Your face is fucking amazing.“ El squawked in a weird, way to deep voice, that made Dustin almost hysterical. He curled up, holding his stomach as if his laughter was painful.

„Your face, Wheeler!“ he screeched, rolling from one side to the other
„Your face! Holy shit!“

„No, your face, Henderson. And your mom.“ Mike grunted, completely convinced this was the smoothest comeback in the history of comebacks.

He'd have to write that down.

„Heh... say, Dustin. You got hair in your nose?“ he snickered.

Dustin stuck one finger up his nose without hesitation, and nodded.

„Yeah... some... why?“ he slurred.

„Cause I got hair in my buttcrack. Let's tie them together.“ Mike yelled.

Next to him, El almost broke down laughing. The lights in the room started to flicker slightly, but she immediately regained control, before someone noticed. Dustin looked a bit on edge now.

„Something wrong?“ Mike asked.

„Dude...“ Dustin moaned with wide open eyes. „This party is like... super loud. What if the cops show up?“

In an instant, Mike was on his feet. He could feel himself freaking out. Somewhere deep down he knew weed could make you paranoid, now though, that was a distant thought, completely irrelevant for the moment. What was really relevant was, that the cops could kick in the front door any minute, and arrest everyone in the house. But Mike was sure, he'd neither have his hands on his head or on the trigger of a gun, as The Clash had put it. He'd be long gone. If not... If they got him...

„Oh shit! Oh shit!“ he yelled, throwing his head around nervously. „I'm gonna... fucking get raped in prison or something! And... fuck me... Hopper's gonna rip off my limbs one by one, once I'm out.“

El looked at him, both amused and worried, lazily getting up to pull

him into a soothing embrace.

„El! We gotta run!“ he rambled on „We... shit, we could make it to Canada in a matter of days. We really gotta... get away! Start a new life! I'm gonna work in the mines if necessary, don't worry, we'll figure things out! Or... Mexico! What about Mexico? No, we'd just get shot, or something!“

This had Dustin in tears again, his paranoia had seemingly vanished over Mike's almost comedic pleading.

Mike couldn't stop himself from hyperventilating, but only until El pressed her lips on his tightly, and shoved her tongue into his mouth almost violently. For a second or two, he went on with his panicked muttering, then the feeling of her rough, somehow sweet kiss swept every thought away. Mike felt his body go limp. He dropped back into the beanbag with El on top of him, sinking his hands in her curly hair. She deepened the kiss, if that was even possible, and moaned into his mouth. Too soon, she pulled away, but to Mike's delight, she didn't stop. Instead, she began pressing a trail of pecks down Mike's chin and neck, down to his collarbone. It was almost too much for him to handle. But just almost. Heavily panting, he peeked at Dustin, who had completely lost focus by now. He had his head leaned back, staring at the ceiling with an expression as though he was glaring at the gates of heaven. Mike, on the other hand, felt like he had just passed said gates.

„Making out drunk is shit.“ he moaned „But this... oh crap!“

El hummed against his neck, and relaxed on top of Mike. He wrapped his arms around her, closing his eyes. Mike didn't care for any bystanders who might watch them in this intimate moment. It was just him and El. No one knew them anyways, and the few people who did were used to them making out.

Years later, Mike would remember this moment from time to time, and thank God for the fact that digital cameras and the Internet hadn't been a thing in 1987.

They stayed like this for an eternity, but at some point, El began twitching a bit and it was clear that she felt the need to move. Mike felt the same way. A surge of energy rushed through his body.

„Wanna go downstairs again?“ he asked with a grin on his face, that said ‚I think I'm fine, let's go wild‘

El nodded, and jumped to her feet. Hand in hand, they hurried down the stairs. The volume of the music hit Mike like a train, feeling the strong bass in his stomach was a pleasure, though. The overwhelming need to jump up and down and go completely crazy overcame him, so he did just that, together with El. He had lost all decency, or at least, most of it, and he knew he should have cared, but he didn't even give a fuck in the deepest regions of his brain and heart.

During the silence, between songs he peeked around the room. So many faces he didn't know came into view, before he spied something, that made his heart leap. Will, in a corner, exchanging shy kisses with a lean boy with short, dark brown hair. They were about the same height, which was slightly smaller than Mike, who considered himself pretty tall, and their statures were very much alike. He poked El's shoulder and pointed at them. When she turned her face back to Mike, a wide grin of happiness and joy had spread across her face.

„I guess that's Milo.“ she shouted over the blaring music.

Mike nodded.

„Will deserves that!“

Mike woke up to beautiful, soft sunlight. This was so much better than it had been in New Mexico. He didn't feel hungover in the least. Probably because he had been more high than drunk last night. He thought he could get used to that feeling. On the other hand, he didn't want to become one of the stereotypical stoners. He kind of despised those people with their constant ‚I don't care‘ attitude. That was nothing he wanted for himself. He had just too much to care for. But every once in a while, if he could get his hands on it, he'd probably smoke weed again. Only with El around to get him off a potential paranoid trip though.

Now, he just had to figure out where exactly he was. Of course, he hadn't forgotten the party or anything that had happened the night before, he just couldn't remember where exactly in the house he had decided to close his eyes and drift off to sleep.

It was hard to make out which room he was in though, because his view was obstructed by... hair. El's curls. Of course. After a solid two hours of going absolutely crazy downstairs, they had gone back to the stoner corner upstairs and gone to sleep in one of the beanbags. By then, more than half of all guests had already left and the music had been turned down a bit. Sleeping in those beanbags had seemed like a good idea, considering how comfortable they had felt back then. Now, Mike's whole body was aching though. He had sunk deep into it, his back hunched forward in an uncomfortable angle. Yeah, he'd pay the price for this once on his feet, that much was sure. There was an uncomfortable pressure on his bladder, and as much as he wanted El to get more sleep, he had to wake her up. As gently as he could, Mike shook her. Immediately, she opened her eyes with a whine of

protest. Her sleep had always been light.

„Morning...” she hummed with a sleepy smile.

Mike pressed a short kiss to her forehead.

„Will you let me get up?” he whispered.

El responded by nodding. She rolled off of him, letting herself sink into another beanbag, where she curled up and closed her eyes again. For a moment, Mike couldn't decide whether he should go to the bathroom, or stay here and wet his pants, just because she was so gorgeous he didn't want to take his eyes off of her. The urge not to walk around with dark stains on his damp pants all day won eventually, and he lazily got up, groaning at the aching pain in his joints. His knees cracked, which was a relief, and for the first time this morning, Mike inspected the room. Except for himself, El and Lucas, who was sleeping on the couch, no one was there. Ungracefully, he stumbled to the hall and headed for the bathroom. Luckily, it was empty. Mike quickly relieved himself and carefully inspected his face in the mirror. After their drunk night in Roswell, he had looked like shit. Now he looked tired, but certainly not sick. Staring into his reflection's eyes, a thought began lingering in the back of his head. It remained there for a few seconds, before his face dropped and he reached for his front pocket with a rush of panic.

Was this another surge of paranoia? Of course, his wallet was still there. And everything inside was too. He had left most of his money well hidden at the motel room anyways, but losing what little he had decided to take along would have been painful nonetheless.

Mike turned on the tap and cleaned his face with cold water. He ran his wet hands through his hair a few times. Exiting the bathroom, he came across Yvonne who was patiently waiting her turn.

„Hey there“ she smirked „Had a good night?“

Mike nodded.

„Uh... did anyone else stay the night?“ he asked.

„Nope. Just you guys.“ Yvonne smirked and, as she saw the guilt on Mike's face, added „Don't worry though. I wouldn't have wanted you to go anyways. The other people all knew their way around the city but I couldn't let you try and get back to your motel.“

„Thanks“ Mike sighed „Yeah, I guess we would have gotten lost or something. It's a few miles east. Cheaper than in the city, you know.“

„I know. Your friend Will told me last night. Anyways, the rest of your little gang are downstairs in the kitchen. Got themselves scrambled eggs. You should join them.“

She hurried into the bathroom and Mike decided, that was a good idea. He could use a good breakfast. The house wasn't exactly what Mike would call a mess. Sure, there were empty, half-empty, and even some unopened bottles everywhere, as well as large puddles of spilled drinks and sticky footprints all over the wooden floor, but nothing seemed to be broken. That was a small wonder in itself.

In the kitchen, he didn't only find Will, Dustin and Max but also Yvonne's brother Milo, whom he hadn't really met the night before. He was sitting next to Will, talking to Dustin, but occasionally glaring at Mike's best friend. Seeing Will so happy and relaxed for once made Mike grin.

„Mike, right?“ Milo said, as he got up, and shook Mike's hand „Good to meet you. Hungry?“

„Like Hell“ Mike grinned, one hand on his grumbling stomach.

He quickly grabbed a plate and shoveled eggs onto it.

„We were just making some plans for today.“ Will said in Mike's direction „We figured, we could go back to the motel, get a shower and change and then meet again here to go to the beach.“

„Swimming? Sounds fucking amazing.“ Mike sighed „Yeah, I guess I kinda need something like that.“

„Or just relax in the sun.“ Milo proposed „I know a nice spot that's not too crowded. I mean, every stretch of beach around here is crowded, but some less so.“

That moment, El stumbled into the kitchen with sleepy eyes, but looking as happy as she could be. Mike made some space for her, and she sat down next to him.

„El... Milo.... Milo... El...“ he introduced them to each other „What do you think about spending a day on the beach?“

El's face lit up even more.

„Sounds great. Gotta get some stuff from the motel though. Uh... did anyone hear from Aaron?“

„He left a note“ Dustin said, handing her the paper.

Mike read along with it.

Hope you guys had a good time. I sure did. If you wanna meet again before you head back home, come to the diner.

-Aaron

„I guess we should at least get back there to say thanks“ Mike said
„Maybe on our last day here.“

4. December 28th, 2002 (II)

Notes for the Chapter:

After this one, I think it's gonna be 2 more chapters for this Will-centric fic, before I'm gonna explore different characters in Part 2. Short chapter ahead.

Will awoke only an hour after he had gone to bed. Well, he hadn't really gone to bed, instead he found himself on a living room couch. With Audrey and Debbie sharing El's old room, Nancy and Jonathan in Will's former room, and Mike and El sleeping in the guest room, there hadn't been another bed for him to use, so he had willingly agreed to sleep on the couch, which wasn't as big a deal as Mike had made it. In his usual, slightly apologetic manner, he had offered to go to his mother's house more than once. Will simply hadn't paid attention, and closed his eyes in protest, without actually planning to fall asleep. As hungover as he had been from the night before, it was only natural that it happened, though.

Someone had turned off the lights, so the only thing illuminating the room were the remnants of the fire that had burned in the fireplace just hours earlier. It still radiated that special kind of heat only a real fire could produce. *A fireplace...* It was a weird thought, but Will imagined seeing this house, and his family, from the perspective of someone completely uninvolved in their troubled past. Everything looked so... perfect, from that perspective. To him, it was perfect, of course, but in a different kind of way. People who didn't know what they had been through could probably look at him, El, Jonathan, Hopper and Joyce, and see a stereotypical nuclear family. They'd probably ask, *Where is your dog?*, or *Which church do you go to?*, as if either of these really mattered. Some of them would probably turn their heads in disgust, if they learned, both Hopper and Joyce had been divorced before. Only a minority, though. The majority would comment on how fantastically modern their patchwork-family was, especially considering it had been formed in the eighties, but only until confronted with parallel worlds, Demogorgons, the Mind Flayer, or ludicrous tales of government conspiracies and psychic children. And, of course, there was that small silver key he was wearing on a

necklace under his shirt. Will grinned into the dark at the thought of actually trying to tell someone the truth. For a long time, it had been a secret wish of his to try, just to see how people would react, but that was completely out of question. Even almost twenty years later, it wasn't safe, no matter what Sam Owens might have said or done. Mike, never sleeping without a gun in his nightstand, and Hopper encouraging this, was proof enough. While this wasn't a pleasant thought, reality was, everyone was happy and content. Will had yet to decide if he was too, his life had turned out pretty good though, and he didn't complain. Careful footsteps interrupted his thought process abruptly. It took only a few seconds for him to realize, someone was rummaging through the fridge. Feeling less sleepy than he should have, Will headed for the kitchen.

„Shit, did I wake you up?“

Mike shot him a guilty glance over his shoulder, his right hand exploring the depths of Hop's and Joyce's fridge.

„No.“ Will brushed it off. „I've been up for a few minutes. Hungry?“

„You have no idea.“ Mike groaned. „Ever since Ben was born, my stomach's been going haywire. Must have something to do with me never getting enough sleep. He's just too damn energetic. PB&J should be fine. You want something?“

„I could use a snack.“ Will admitted, but quickly added „Actually, I think I could use more than a snack. Dinner's been a few hours ago. Got room for fries?“

Mike had already placed the jelly back in the fridge.

„Benny’s?“

Will rolled up his sleeve to check his watch. He was still wearing his V-Neck pullover over a button down shirt and his jeans, which now looked slightly crumpled from sleeping on the couch.

„It’s not even eleven. They’re open until midnight. But you better tell your wife we’re out for an hour.“ he said.

„Yeah. She’d not appreciate me leaving without telling her.“ Mike replied. „She’s still up reading, anyways. Be back in a minute.“

While Mike went back upstairs as quietly and carefully as he had come down, Will went for his shoes and jacket, only to realize he had no idea where his wallet was. He was still looking for it when Mike was back, but his friend only huffed, switched on the light in the living room and pointed at the counter above the fireplace.

„You had it in your back pocket, and before you went to sleep, you said it bothered you. Jeez, were you drunk again?“

Will didn’t comment, just putting his wallet back where it belonged, before he slipped in his shoes and winter jacket. The cold air stung in his face and lungs, but the days when he had despised, or even feared the cold, were long gone.

„Kinda exciting.“ he chuckled.

„Huh?“

On their way from the porch to the sidewalk, Mike looked at Will, appearing mildly confused. He lit a cigarette for himself, before he

offered the pack to his friend, who politely declined. Now, that his mom and Hop both had stopped, he couldn't possibly go on with this terrible habit.

„Exciting.“ Will repeated. „I was just thinking about how we'd sometimes camp on your front lawn, and then sneak out, and just explore the town at night.“

„Jeez, that was even before all that crazy shit happened.“ Mike sighed. „Can you imagine, we actually wanted to go on an adventure?“

„I remember.“ Will agreed in a slightly melancholic tone. „I think, adventures are only really fun and exciting as long as you know, no one's really gonna get hurt. The only real risk was getting grounded.“

„I don't know...“ Mike contemplated, blowing gray clouds out of his nose. „That one time we came across that drunk hobo could have turned out pretty dangerous.“

Will shivered at the thought of that unwashed, bearded old man, stumbling towards them on Fuller Street, but remembering the way they had hid behind a hedge on some front lawn made him smirk.

„I think Lucas was already with us back then, wasn't he?“

Mike frowned for a second, probably trying to recall the exact year this had happened.

„Yeah, he was.“ he finally said. „Not Dustin, though. I think it was

the summer before fourth grade. Speaking of Lucas...”

Will slowed his pace a bit, closing his eyes for just a second. He hadn't wanted to bring the topic up, and whatever news Mike might have had, it could have waited until the next day, or maybe, until after New Year's Eve. It was too late now, though, so he braced himself for the inevitable.

„Sorry...” Mike muttered. „I don't like thinking about it either. Looks like the party is finished.”

„The party...” Pained laughter accompanied Will's words. „I think the party was finished when we graduated high school. I mean, we've never been together as a whole again after '89, have we?”

„No.” Mike admitted carefully. „But this is different. They're really pulling through with it.”

„How bad is it? I haven't talked to either of them in weeks.”

Mike shrugged.

„El's been in contact with Max, and Lucas called me last week. They're not gonna fight over custody. It's something.”

„I never thought they would.” Will said sternly. „No matter what happened between them, they wouldn't let it out on Jacob. They know he needs them both. Uh... what happened, anyways? Do you know anything?”

„Only thing I know...“ Mike sighed „...is that things went downhill pretty quickly. Credit where credit is due, Lucas didn't try to turn me against Max, she didn't try to turn El against him. We're still friends. But I don't know if they are.“

„Time will tell.“ Will commented, unable to think of anything better to say.

He didn't want their group to fall apart because of a divorce. It felt wrong, painful, even if it wasn't as nasty as his parents' divorce had been. In a way, it had even been a relief. Maybe even one of the best things to ever happen to him, but he couldn't see how this could apply to Max and Lucas. He knew for a fact, they were both loving parents. As there was nothing they could do, except maybe emotional support, and because he wanted to get his mind off it for now, Will groaned

„Let's just talk about something more pleasant, okay? We can't do anything for now.“

He knew, that Mike knew, they'd have to deal with it sooner or later, but it also looked like Mike wanted to let the topic rest for now. A silent agreement between them formed, they'd only bring it up once they'd get together with Dustin and El again.

„Okay, how about this.“ Mike was quick to change topics, thankfully, and the way he chuckled got Will's spirits up a bit. „Today after dinner, in the living room...“

„...you looked totally absent.“ Will interjected, because that was exactly how it had been.

At some point, Mike's mind had seemed to have wandered off, and he had stayed like this for half an hour or more, all while everyone else had been chatting, laughing, or sipping on their Eggnog occasionally. Except for Nancy, who had stuck with tea. No one had asked why, though, so probably only Will and Jonathan knew.

„Of course you noticed.“ Mike grinned. „I was looking at our photo from San Francisco. Don't you sometimes admire the fashion?“

„You mean, your Polo-shirts?“ Will grunted, and Mike snapped back „What about that violet button down? You always propped up the collar and with the sunglasses and those white pants, you looked like you were born on the set of Miami Vice or something. But I guess we all thought we looked really sharp. The only one who really did was Lucas, though. He's literally the only guy I know who doesn't look like he's forcing it when he's wearing a bandana.“

Will was only listening to his friend half-heartedly now. The memories had already hit him like a ton of bricks. First, he thought back to the night before, when he had sat on the front porch with Jonathan, then the connection formed, and for the rest of the way to Benny's Diner, he left the real world, diving back into the night that, in a way, had made him who he was.

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm so sorry for the Lumax divorce, but that's just how it plays out in my mind.

5. July 24th - July 25th, 1987

Will couldn't deny it, he was having a good time at that party. Looking back at his summer so far, he had almost always had a good time. First, there had been planning, packing, getting the cars ready. Then, there had been five days on the road, driving up to ten hours a day. He had enjoyed that, even the time he and his friends had spent under a harsh desert sun. Now, there was San Francisco, the city he had immediately learned to love. His friends probably didn't see it, but there was art everywhere. From graffiti on the walls of that run down club they had visited the night before, to even billboards. Everything looked so much brighter and more skillfully made here, than in Hawkins. And, of course, there was the acceptance. Will wasn't under any illusions, people like him had a hard time wherever they went, but here, in San Francisco, the voices were slowly vanishing. The voices of Lonnie, Troy, James, all those people who always managed to make him feel like a degenerate. For a short, blissful moment the day before, he had even managed to believe they were wrong. It had gotten him slight relief on that roller coaster his emotions had been for the three or four years he had known he liked boys.

The music really got to him, in a good way, probably because he had already had a few drinks. The dancing did too, though, so he found himself needing a small break, shortly before sundown. He spotted Mike, and patted him on the back to get his attention. Because the music was so loud, Will didn't even try to talk to him. Instead, he pointed at himself, and then pointed up, to which Mike responded by nodding. Emptying his beer, he headed upstairs, where he hadn't been yet. Will suspected, it would be quieter in the second floor. It was, and it was wonderfully moody too. A bit darker, relatively warm, and full of places to sit down and relax. He came across a living room with several couches, and a bunch of colorful beanbags in a corner of the room. Above them, a crude cardboard sign with the words *'Stoner Corner'* written on it in black letters. The room smelled accordingly, not unpleasant, though. A few people were occupying it, passing a joint around, but they seemed to remain oblivious to his

presence. While it wasn't as loud as downstairs, the music was still pumping up from below the room, completely drowning out his footsteps. The moment Will leaned back on the most puffy looking couch, he regretted not having refilled his plastic cup before coming upstairs. He didn't even notice someone else sitting next to him, before a soft, pleasant voice rang in his ear.

„Hey there, stranger.“

Will's eyes jerked open, his head snapped around, and, for a moment, he was breathless at the sight of the boy next to him. It was a bit like looking into a mirror, only at second glance the differences became apparent. He was about the same height as Will, and his hair was similar, maybe a bit brighter. Will figured they were probably the same age, though there was something about the boy that made him seem just so much more grown up than Will felt. Not his relatively soft facial contours, or his slim overall shape. When Will finally pinpointed it, it hit him hard: Confidence. That was it. Wondering about it had taken him so long, and his face had probably shown his confusion so drastically, that the smile, the other one had mustered in the beginning, quickly diminished.

„God, sorry. That was weird, wasn't it?“ he groaned. „I mean, I'm not a waitress at some shady bar.“

„Yeah... uh... I mean... no, it's fine.“ Will managed to stutter, awestruck by the boy's voice.

A hint of relief crossed his face, when he extended his hand in Will's direction.

„I know it was weird, but let's just start over again, okay?“ he said.
„I'm Milo.“

Will grabbed hold of his hand, and, shaking maybe a tad too hard, introduced himself.

„Will. Nice to meet you.“

Milo grinned at him.

„I haven't seen you around here before. You know my sister?“

„Should I?“ Will asked, raising an eyebrow.

What a weird question.

„Well, if I don't know you, and my sister doesn't either, that makes you someone we haven't invited, doesn't it?“ Milo laughed.

The realization hammered against Will's head from the inside. He had just ran into one of the hosts, and now he and his friends were busted. His face must have given his concern away, because Milo reassured him

„Do you think I'm gonna kick you out? Shit, that's what it's about. Meeting new people, and stuff. Until now, I was kinda disappointed with our guests so far. Just the same old jerks I always hang out with. Not that I don't like some of them. And I'm talking too much, right?“

„You're a bit on the fast side.“ Will admitted, secretly admiring Milo's outspoken way.

„People tell me all the time.“ Milo chuckled in response. „Even my parents and Yvonne. Uh, that’s my sister. She’s around here somewhere, but I don’t think she’s having a good time. Because she’s responsible. So, if anything happens, or breaks, our parents are gonna tell her how disappointed they are, or whatever. They’re hippies, so I guess it’s more likely they’d drop some Acid and... uh... Will?“

The more Milo spoke, the more relaxed Will became. In his stomach, a tingling sensation he couldn’t quite grasp, formed. Something was so different about Milo. The way he looked at Will, never breaking eye contact... it should have creeped him out, in fact, it was fascinating though. As fascinating as the slim lips, that were now moving without producing any audible sounds. What was he thinking? What was he considering? Did Milo come closer? It looked like it.

„Will? Hey! You okay?“

Milo’s snapping fingers in front of his face pulled Will out of it again. Had he seriously just zoned out a second time in one conversation? He could feel himself blush heavily, when Milo asked

„Had a few drinks? Don’t get me wrong, you just look a little tipsy.“

„Yeah... no...“ Will tried to answer under his breath. „I’m not really drunk. Just... uh... lost in thought.“

„Lost in thought, looking at my face.“ Milo stated matter-of-factly.

Will didn’t miss the suspicious undertone in his voice, and something in his mind shifted again, bringing up everything he had managed to forget about for a few minutes. The sudden realization, that this was one of those moments he had always feared, went from his brain right to his guts, where it dropped like a heavy stone. A situation he

had often experienced in nightmares had ensued. Will had given himself away, and now he'd have to deal with the consequences. Milo's face showed an equal amount of realization, and that's why Will knew exactly, what was about to happen. He'd start yelling. He'd expose Will's weakness to the world. He'd probably punch him, punish him for his degeneracy, because that's what he felt, he deserved. Had his heart fluttered with excitement just a minute ago, it hammered painfully fast now. Will closed his eyes, getting ready to take the hits like he always did, tears already swelling in the corners of his eyes. He inhaled deeply, but something entirely different happened, and Will couldn't help but gasp, when he felt a soft hand touching his. His eyes snapped open in an instant, revealing to him Milo's face, now with an almost fearful expression.

„I don't wanna sound weird again..." he slowly said. „...but, let's talk somewhere more private, okay?"

Will didn't know what exactly to make of this, but Milo hadn't punched him yet, so that was something. Even if he just wanted to smash Will's head in in private, that was better than in front of everyone. He just nodded. Milo didn't let go of his hand while directing him towards the stairs, dragging him to the third floor.

„My room." he simply said, unlocking the door and pushing Will inside.

From Milo's window, Will could see the last, dim streak of sunlight in the sky. The view might have been obstructed by buildings, but it was a beautiful sight nonetheless. Milo didn't switch the lights on, and in the twilight that the streetlights produced, Will could only make out the large bed, a desk with piles of paper on it, and a few posters of bands like Duran Duran and New Order. It strangely reminded him of his own room, actually, just without the drawings and paintings he had produced over the years. Milo took place on the side of his bed and offered

„Sit down.“

Will did so reluctantly, unsure why he even hesitated.

„I’m sorry.“ he whispered, before he knew what he was doing.

„No, I’m sorry.“ Milo replied, looking at him sternly. „That was just... stupid. I upset...”

„You didn’t upset me.“ Will cut him short. „I kinda upset myself. That’s what I do. Happens all the time, honestly.“

Milo frowned at that.

„I know it was my fault. I thought you were... you know... interested, but I had no right to assume that.“

Will had a hard time understanding what he had just heard. Milo had assumed he was ‘interested’? What was that even supposed to mean? It clicked almost audibly in his mind, when he finally got it.

„You didn’t insult me.“ he carefully said. „I thought I had insulted you by... staring, I guess.“

„Okay.“ Milo half-laughed, half-groaned. „Now I got to ask. Are you... Do you like boys?“

It took a few seconds for Will to answer, but with his heart racing like never before, he managed to breathe

„Yeah.“

Suddenly, he was hyper-aware of everything. His own heartbeat, his blinking, his breathing, his dry mouth, and the darkness that enveloped both of them. He could only see the right half of Milo's face, illuminated by what little light came through the window.

„Something tells me, you're not happy with it.“ Milo sighed, in a tone way too sad for Will's taste.

„You're right.“ he answered truthfully, the familiar stinging in his eyes returning.

He was determined not to cry though. He managed to hold the tears in, but the words poured out of him like a waterfall. Milo didn't seem to mind, in fact, he put on a smile that said ‚Go on, I'm listening‘. So Will talked.

„It's just so damn hard. I mean, people are giving me a hard time about it and... my friends tell me I shouldn't believe what they say, but sometimes I can't help it.“

„Wanna know how I deal with bullies?“ Milo asked, but Will chuckled weakly

„I can deal with bullies. But has your dad ever told you, you're a fairy, and you're gonna die of AIDS?“

„Shit...“ the other boy breathed, looking shocked beyond belief.
„Where are you from?“

„Indiana. Little town called Hawkins.“

Will flinched slightly when Milo took his hand again. Just a second later though, he noticed how good it felt.

„You like it here?“

Will nodded, thinking back to the day before.

„I love it. The weather... the people I’ve met so far...“

„...which includes me?“ Milo chuckled.

„Yeah.“ Will confirmed, and he meant it. „I’m not trying to get too excited. I know it’s not all smooth sailing for people like me... or us... around here, but it’s better than home. In Hawkins, I can’t even...“

He didn’t know what to say next. Or, he did know, but couldn’t force his lips to form the words.

„You can’t even find someone at home?“ Milo suggested.

At the sight of him coming a bit closer, Will could only croak

„I couldn’t ask anyone... everyone would know...“

After that, he became numb. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t move an inch. He could only stare into those green eyes, enchanted, with his rushing through his head in hot waves.

„So...“ Milo began slowly, his voice so quiet, it almost didn't reach Will's ears. „...you've never even... you know... kissed anyone?“

There wasn't a single thought left on Will's mind, but he shook his head mechanically, without the reason why he did it ever reaching his consciousness. Suddenly, Milo's other hand, the hand Will wasn't holding in his, reached forwards, and though the touch was as gentle as it could have been, it burned like lava on Will's cheek.

„You wanna try?“

His numbness only increased, if that was possible, and still, he felt himself nod. A faint, inner voice told him, this was the moment where people usually close their eyes, but Will couldn't. He kept staring, even when Milo was so close he couldn't see his eyes anymore. The music from two floors below seemed further away than the moon, that was beginning to show up behind the line of houses in front of the window. He came closer so slowly, it was almost painful, but finally, it happened.

Lips crashed against lips. A box of fireworks set off, all at once, and the sparks quickly reached his chest, his stomach, before they spread through his limbs, arriving even in his fingertips. He felt like he was only half human, the other half being fire, or static electricity. Milo didn't move a lot, neither did Will, but it lasted so long, so unbelievably long, and it felt so right. It wasn't wrong, it couldn't possibly be wrong. Will was completely convinced, nothing so soft, warm and fulfilling could ever be wrong, no matter what people like Lonnie or Troy might say, just because they had never experienced anything that could compare.

Lucky for Will, or lucky for both of them, it lasted exactly as long as it should have lasted. The moment they let go, a hint of sadness washed over Will, but that made him realize, he wanted every kiss in his life to end like this, because that meant, it had been good. Better than good. Milo smiled at him, still close enough for Will to be able to take in every detail of his face. He felt his lips curving upwards,

but in a shy way. Will was aware, had there been more light, his head would have looked like a tomato.

„Did you like it?“ Milo asked bluntly.

„Yeah.“

„You wanna...“

He was interrupted by the door flying wide open, and the light being switched on. The sudden burst of brightness hurt Will's eyes, that had long adapted to the darkness.

„Okay, what the fuck is...“ he heard a furious female voice behind him, that quickly changed into a soft, apologetic one. „Milo! Thank god! Just wanted to check on the bedrooms, and I really thought someone had broken in.“

Will felt mortified, to say the least, and when he turned his head around, he recognized the person that had entered as the girl he and his friends had met briefly when they had arrived. Now he knew, she was Milo's sister.

„Will, this is my sister Yvonne, Yvonne, Will.“ Milo said curtly.

Yvonne put on a relieved, wonderfully reassuring smile, which Will really needed, even if he wouldn't have admitted it.

„You're one of the guys from Indiana, right?“ she grinned, shaking his hand. „I was just talking to one of your friends... uh... the one

with the hat.“

„Dustin.“ Will said. „But please don't think everyone in Indiana curses as much as he does.“

„I read somewhere, that cursing is an indication for honesty.“ she replied. „Anyways, I like him. Hope I'm gonna meet all of you before the night is over.“

She was already turning around to leave, when she suddenly took a step back and remarked

„You guys are staying in a hotel, right?“

„Motel, few miles away.“

„In that case, you're gonna sleep here.“ It was more of an order, than an invitation. „I can't have a group of drunk kids from the other side of the country stumble through the city at night. You'd never get there alive. I'm supposed to be an adult, after all.“

Will didn't object. Not because he didn't dare, he simply didn't want. He wanted to stay. Looking at Milo, he desperately wanted to stay.

„Okay, I guess you guys got a lot to *talk about*. I'll leave you to it and see if I can meet your other friends.“ Yvonne remarked, grinning knowingly, before she switched the light back off, and closed the door behind herself.

A few seconds passed, while Will's eyes adjusted back to the twilight

of Milo's now unlit room. Slowly, he was beginning to see the contours, and just moments later, the details of the face that was still so close to his.

„Sorry.“ Milo chuckled. „She's pretty... direct, isn't she?“

„It's okay.“ Will shrugged.

It really was. He had been startled at first, but the way Yvonne had talked to her brother had reminded him so much of Jonathan, he had liked her almost instantly.

„My brother knows too, you know. He lives in New York now, but that really helps, doesn't it?“

„Does help.“ Milo agreed. „As you said, it's not all smooth sailing here either, but your family backing you up is the best thing you could wish for. You got your parents in on it? Shit, I mean, your mom. Hope your dad is far away by now.“

„He's been gone for years.“ Will said, his tone as emotionless as he felt about Lonnie most of the time. „But my mom and my step-dad both know. They're awesome.“

„Good for you, really. Uh... well... I love my family, and all, but you gotta admit, she kinda killed the mood, didn't she?“

Now, that Milo mentioned it, Will noticed how the moment had passed. There was a strange emptiness, that made him somewhat melancholic, so he tried to think of something to say.

„Do you think we can bring it back?“ was what Will managed to come up with. „I... I kinda wanna do it again.“

He didn't have to wait long for the response, which came in the form of Milo pressing his lips against Will's once again. To his delight, there was more movement involved this time. More exploring. Feeling more confident than before, Will became less and less passive. Milo obviously had some experience, maybe not a lot, but certainly more than Will had. And even while Will probably wasn't a particularly good kisser, the other boy seemed to enjoy himself enough to go on for a while.

When Milo finally asked, if Will wanted to dance, he was already far enough gone to agree, willing to go public. He let Milo guide him downstairs, but before they could return to the first floor, where the music was still blaring, and people were shouting, he took a look at the ‚Stoner Corner‘, and stopped dead in his tracks. Putting one hand on Milo's shoulder, he pointed at the beanbags, where Dustin was lying, staring at nothing, and a mop of curly, brown hair was meeting one of unruly, black hair. Mike had his back turned towards Will, El sitting on top of him, oblivious to her surroundings.

„Jeez, get a room.“ Milo mumbled, not loud enough for them to hear.

Will doubted, they would have noticed anyways, though.

„My best friend, Mike, and my step-sister, El.“ he whispered.

„No way! How can you live like this?“

„Easy.“ Will shrugged. „I know them. They’re... different, you know. They’re not just in love, they love each other. Like, enough to get married. They’re never gonna spend a day apart for the rest of their lives, I’d bet my life on it. Can’t say I like seeing them like this, though.“

„Probably high as fuck. No offense, but they’re in the Stoner Corner.“ Milo chuckled. „Let’s go downstairs. I don’t wanna disturb them.“

„Me neither. Okay, let’s have some fun.“

And Will did have fun. And a few drinks. And maybe a few drinks more. Yvonne was already busy throwing the last drunk or stoned people out, when he and Milo were finally stumbling up the stairs, arm in arm. When they passed second floor, Will smirked at the sight of El and Mike, curled up in a beanbag, Dustin next to them, snoring. Lucas and Max occupied a couch together. Milo directed Will further up the stairs, but past his room.

„Where... we going?“ he slurred.

His thoughts were pretty much clear from what he could tell, it was just that his lips wouldn’t entirely obey his commands.

„Roof.“ Milo said. „Warm night.“

There was another flight of stairs, a lot narrower and without carpet on it, leading up from third floor. Will and Milo were having a hard time to climb up next to each other, especially in their drunk state, so it took longer than it could have. The reward was worth the trouble, though. Milo pushed Will through a metal door onto the flat roof. The sight almost managed to sober him up. There were lights in every direction. Thousands of them, shimmering in the dark. Streetlights and cars mostly, and while they gave the impression of activity, everything seemed so calm. As if he could read Will's thoughts, Milo whispered

„Wish I could see it like you do. Nothing special for me. Same old Frisco.“

The one thing Will had thought about more than anything else that night made its way across his tongue, before he knew it.

„I'm gonna come back.“ he said, in an entirely sober voice. „Once I'm out of High School, I'm gonna come back here. I don't care what it takes. This is the place for me.“

Leaning on the railing that encircled the roof with both hands, he felt a gentle touch on his shoulder. The wind came from the residential areas, swiping the noise of the city away, which made for an eerie silence. To Will, it was perfect. He didn't just see lights anymore, he could see a wonderful painting of the future. People who didn't know him. People like Milo. None of them knew about his past. They wouldn't take pity on him. They wouldn't treat him as though he could break at the slightest touch. A lot of them would accept him. Not everyone, of course, this wasn't Utopia after all, but enough of them to be able to block out the voices every once in a while, and that was all he could ask for. The trails of light he knew were streets were all paths laid out before him, and he'd just have to choose.

„Wanna stay up here? Got folding sun... uh... sunloungers round here somewhere.“ Milo asked after a while.

„Please.“ Will breathed.

Milo had to move a folded sunshade out of the way to get to them, and somehow, he managed to set the sunloungers up for the both of them. He set his own to a horizontal position, so he could properly lie down on his side, but Will kept his slightly upright, to be able to see the city. It took longer than it should have for him to fall asleep, and just before it happened, he hoped the alcohol wouldn't make him forget too many details about this night. As a matter of fact though, he'd still remember everything vividly fifteen years later.

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm nearing the conclusion of this fic, so I made it part of a series. I want to have other POV characters during the same time period, but this fic is supposed to be about Will, so I'm gonna have to do that in another work. It was weird enough to have Mike's POV in a Will story as it is.

Also, I'm only so fast because I'm sick and I got nothing better to do than watch Netflix, pity myself, and write things. Can't keep that pace up forever, though. :)

6. December 28th, 2002 (III)

„Will? Will! Staring at the menu won't get you far.“

Will's entire body jerked violently when he snapped out of it. He found himself in Benny's diner, sitting opposite to Mike at a table near the front window. An annoyed looking waitress, around twenty years old, looked down at him contemptuously. In his memory, blurry images of their way through the near empty streets of Hawkins, of sitting down around this table, receiving the menus. He even remembered answering to some of Mike's questions, while his subconscious had been busy with something completely different.

„Fries.“ he said. „A lot of them.“

The waitress took off, and Will noticed the large glass of Coke in front of him. Only, that it wasn't Coke, even if it said so on the glass. Will frowned when he took a sip.

„What?“ Mike chuckled. „You know we're a Pepsi family, and since you didn't say anything...“

„What are you eating?“ Will asked.

„Seriously? Did I behave like that last knight? Jeez.“

„We mostly left you alone.“ he shrugged. „Everyone kinda knew you were some place else. You really got me thinking there, that's all.“

„The photo got me thinking first.“ Mike sighed, leaning back a bit.
„Best summer I’ve ever had.“

„Really?“ Will didn’t quite believe his best friend. He was convinced, Mike had a good time in San Francisco, but calling it the best summer of his life didn’t seem realistic, considering what mess he had come home to at the end of their trip. Mike preempted him, by brining it up himself.

„I mean it. I’ve told you before, haven’t I? It was really a blessing in disguise.“

„And you’ve really never missed your dad?“ Will asked skeptically.

„Ted.“ Mike firmly corrected him. „Have you ever missed your dad?“

Will didn’t need to say anything for his best friend to take it back. He wasn’t mad, though.

„Sorry. I know, you’re winning every game of ,Who’s-got-the-worst-dad‘.“

„Well, if I, of all our friends, had the worst dad, it’s only fair that I got the best dad in the end, isn’t it?“ Will sighed.

He was satisfied to see how his words made Mike smile.

„Hop’s the best.“ he agreed. „He never actually tried to kill me, even when he found out El and I were... you know... And after Ted was

gone, he helped. A lot, actually. In the two years between that summer and our graduation, Hop was more of a dad than Ted. And I wouldn't be as close with Holly, if he hadn't left. So like I said, blessing in disguise."

"I think the real blessing is the indifference we can allow ourselves." Will contemplated. "You know, because we have people we can rely on, no matter what."

Will didn't exactly like the strange grin that spread on Mike's face from one ear to the other, when his friend pointed a finger at his face.

"Got you." he said. "People to rely on. You're having a hard time with that, right?"

"I'm fine. Really." Will tried to assure him, but deep down he knew, Mike wouldn't let go of it this time, like he had in the morning, when he had asked Will about his Christmas.

"So, Jon finally got you thinking?"

"Are you kidding? If anything, he stopped me thinking." Will all but laughed. "And I fucking needed that."

He had talked a bit too loud, but peering around the diner, Will saw it was completely empty, besides him and Mike, so he continued, a little quieter

"I really thought I could force it, you know. And that constantly got

me worried about no one staying with me for more than a few months. Okay, look at this.“

He reached for his shirt pocket under his pullover, and handed Mike the little note he had kept there. Mike unfolded it, and read, mumbling along to the words

„Take a break from contract work... Get a gym membership... Quit smoking... Drink less... Stop drinking alone... Take a break from relationships... Worry less...” His lips cracked up in a smile again. „Ambitious, Byers. Already started with the no smoking thing, I take it?“

„Mom and Hop both stopped. I just can't keep going. I was the one who talked them into quitting. But, we were talking about...”

„...relationships.“ Mike said. „Yeah. And I guess you're somewhat right, taking a break wouldn't be too bad. But what are you gonna do when that break is over?“

For reasons he couldn't quite grasp, or maybe didn't want to grasp, Will felt his stomach clench painfully.

„Get back out there, I guess.“ he mumbled. „Plenty of fish in the ocean, and all that.“

„God, Byers.“ Mike groaned, looking pained but amused. „You're so fucking dense, sometimes I really wonder how you haven't imploded yet. Can't blame Jonathan, he doesn't know all the facts, but you should know better. You got some friends in San Francisco, right? Like, you reconnected when you came back. Yvonne... Aaron... all those people.“

„Them, and a lot you don't really know, actually.“ Will said, beginning to understand where Mike was going with this.

„But you're not talking to any of them about relationship issues, right again?“

Will nodded in response.

„And you... complete and utter moron can't think of anyone... Anyone in this giant city, you call home these days, who might be interested in your relationships? Or, your lack of relationships? Come on, man, I already gave you a little push in the right direction. I wouldn't even have thought about it before tonight, but I really had some time to think a few hours ago.“

„Look, Mike...“ Will began hastily. „You wanna help me, thank you, by the way, but I'm grown up, and I don't think I need someone to tell me who might be... I don't know, I mean, you live thousands of miles away, you can't possibly...“

He knew, he was talking himself deeper and deeper into it, and there was no way out now. Mike finally dropped the bomb.

„How often do you see Milo?“

The words rang in Will's ears, while the picture of green eyes in the dark flashed in front of his inner eye again. He could feel himself blush heavily, and Mike's triumphant face told him, his friend felt that he had succeeded.

„Dinner, once or twice a month.“ Will mumbled, more to himself, than to Mike. „And whenever we run into each other.“

„And I guess, you never talk about anything too serious, like how the both of you are constantly circling around each other?“

„How would you know?“ Will snapped at that, feeling that Mike's words hit home more than he wanted to admit.

„Because I called...“ Mike started, but Will yelped

„You didn't call Milo! Tell me you didn't!“

„I would, If you'd let me finish.“ Mike calmly said. „I called Yvonne. After you'd gone to sleep. Told her it was just for old time's sake, and because it's almost New Year's, and all that. And I guess that was the truth. Turns out she's really worried about her little brother, though. Third breakup for this century so far, did you know that?“

Every muscle in Will's body tensed, and only relaxed when the waitress broke the silence that had followed Mike's words. She set a large pile of fries down in front of each of them, along with a variety of sauces or dips. Hungrier than he had thought, he took a mouth full. Now that they were already there, he could as well give in.

„You think it was a mistake.“ Will stated. „Not resuming where we'd left off. Just... agreeing on friendship.“

„The hell do I know?“ Mike asked with an amused grunt. „I’m just playing messenger because, apparently, I’m dealing with two adults, who are too dense to tell each other some simple facts.“

„Stop it already, Wheeler! You’re confusing me!“ Will groaned. „One minute you’re telling me to try it again, the other you’re pretending you don’t know!“

„Don’t twist my words.“ his friend snapped. „I’m telling you, even if you consider Milo just a friend, you can’t deny he’s a good friend, and you should tell him what’s bugging you about your life. Because, face it, I’m not with you in San Francisco. Neither are Jonathan, El, Dustin, Lucas, Max, your Mom, Hop or Nancy. And because he’s apparently going through the same problems.“

It was too late. Simple as that. Too late to resume a ten-day romance, especially after almost fourteen years of subsequent friendship. Green eyes in the dark. That was all that remained. Just an image. And for years, Will had told himself, that was enough. That it was better that way. Now, he at least doubted that conclusion. Not that he was crazy enough to try anything. That would totally go against his resolutions. But what about later? He shrugged mentally. Later would be later, and for the moment, that was good enough. Chewing his fries, Mike slid the note back to Will with one finger. He rolled his eyes, and decided to give his best friend, what he wanted. It took a second to find the pen in his pocket.

Talk to Milo

He had scribbled the words quickly and crudely, smaller than the rest of his resolutions, but Mike looked satisfied.

„While you're at it..." he said. „...scrap that gym membership bullshit. Just a giant ripoff.“

After midnight, in the darkness of the living room, he stared at the small piece of paper he could hardly even see. The words appeared in front of his inner eye more than in front of his actual eyes.

Talk to Milo

In July of 1987, sixteen year old Will Byers had packed his bag, and gotten behind the Wheel of a green Ford Pinto, that had belonged to his mother once. He had taken his friends Max and Lucas along, while his best friend Mike had taken El and Dustin in his Torino. From then on, Will had followed a road for five days, not knowing that, at the other end of it, he would find a place that would become his home. Would it be too much of a coincidence, if he hadn't only found a place that was perfect for him, but also a person, right at that place? Or had there never been that huge of a coincidence to begin with? Had he found a person by mere chance, and then fallen in love with the place because of that person? Had he spent nearly one and a half decades with his eyes closed? Now, that his best friend had planted the thought in his head, he was determined not to leave it at a simple ‚time will tell‘. Because he knew, time would never tell, just from sitting around, keeping his hands in his lap. Because the answers to his questions had not been written yet. It was within his abilities to take influence, so in 2003, Will Byers would fight for answers. But he would take it slow.

Notes for the Chapter:

To make it clear, this isn't the end, in case you were thinking that. I'm just done with Will's POV for now. There are so many great characters to imagine a future for, so I'm gonna do that. ;)